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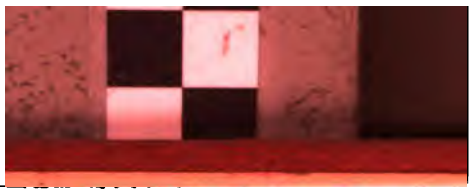

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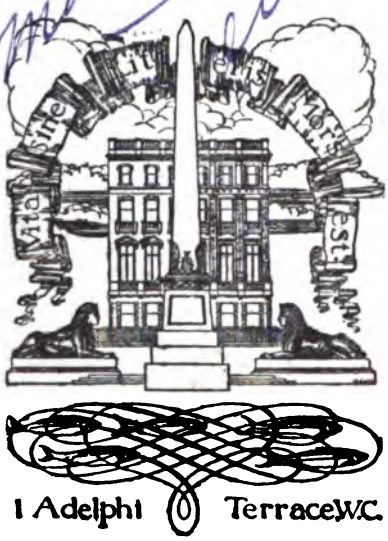

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THROUGH SORROW'S GATES

was sure; but the dark secret of his life was known only to himself and to one other of the dwellers on the moor. He was thinking of that secret now, and of the far-off days when he had been a Lomax, Lord of the Manor which embraced, not only this wide sweep of moor, but Marshcotes village also, and Ling Crag, and a score of scattered farmsteads. He was Lord of the Manor still, for that matter, but he chose to live apart, and the income from his lands was being added, year by year, to the other moneys for which he found scant use.

Between the hut and the eastward wastes of moor there lay an oval hollow, banked by a wall of peat from which the bilberry bushes stretched naked arms to the down-coming flakes of snow; and within the banks lay the fields that Griff Lomax had rescued already from the heath, the barren lands which he had yet to till. From of old the place had been named Lostwithens by the country-folk. Once, far back in the long line of the race, a Lomax had come here, tired of the world's emptiness, and had set to work to fight the moor, and had given the name of Withens to the intaken lands. He had died in the midst of his labour, and none had followed him to this world's-end land, and Lostwithens grew, little by little, to be the accepted title of the place. Strange stories had grown up about it, as generation followed generation of the superstitious hill-men. It was haunted land, they said; and belated travellers, passing near it at time of full moon, had seen the lost fields smiling up at them, with meadow-grass and waving crops of oats in place of the rough heather that they knew. One with the myriad ghosts of Ling Crag Moor was this lone place, Lostwithens; its name was often on men's lips, when after-supper pipes were lit about the hearth-place, when the talk turned all on boggarts, when the Hunting Squire and the Ghostly Dog and the Sorrowful Woman of Wildwater were spoken of, with hushed voices, as phantoms which any man might meet upon his homeward way.

Intaking of the heath—the making of good land from barren—had been a passion always with the moor-folk. It had acquired a dignity, a measure of romance, a power to thrill the fancy and stiffen each man's fibres, which were possible only among a people whose far-back fathers had felt the love of soil for soil's sake, of fight for fight's sake. Small wonder, then, that this rough-hewn giant of a man, who might have lived at ease, who chose instead to labour ceaselessly, should have acquired an eerie reputation; for he had not merely gone back to the old love of intake—he had chosen haunted ground in which to work, and cared not a stiver, so it seemed, that the ghosts pressed thick about him, while he ate, and while he worked, and while he slept.

And now Griff Lomax was looking out upon the snow, upon the thickening grey-blue of the clouds. Beside him was his dog, a shaggy, great-headed beast, who showed something of his master's gravity, something of his master's wide, far-seeing outlook upon life. With the dog, and with his secret, Lomax dwelt aloof in this wind-driven spot. He seemed content; and always, when he looked as now across the moor, he was hearkening to those under-voices of the heath which are busy constantly amid the greater silences. He had gone through the gates of sorrow once for all—those gates which each of us must pass if we would find the deeper pain and the livelier joy that await us in the shrouded lands beyond. Long, long ago he had left the gates behind him; long ago he had traversed the dark ways which test the greatness of a man to persevere and falter not; and now at last he was journeying, slowly, groping as he went, toward the goal of recompense and heartsease.

On the sudden, as he watched the land grow blurred and grey, his face darkened. It was on such a day as this, with snow beneath, and snow fast falling, and snow in every sullen bank of cloud, that the big gulf had opened between the past and present. In one such day as this he had cut himself off from his own world; and

the agony of those few buried hours, although it could not touch him now with the old keenness, was real enough to bring the sweat out on his forehead, to cloud his tranquil eyes and dim the fine austereness of his face.

The mood passed, however, and he fell to thinking of old days, sadly, it may be, but quietly, as if he stood at the graveside of a friend once loved, but long ago supplanted.

All day he watched the snowstorm gather strength; all day he looked across the shrouded moor, and saw the phantoms of the past come riding on the hurrying flakes. Like a dream the old life showed—his wooing, fierce and tangled—the spell of warm weather, brief as the upland summer—the after-tragedy that had driven him, more brute than man, to saddle his mare, and ride her till she dropped, searching, always searching, for the man who had been, to his dazed mind, the cause of all his misery. He had taken a second horse, had found his enemy at last, lying dead of the snow-sleep on the Ludworth road, and had cursed him as he lay there; and then he had ridden aimlessly abroad again, until—until—but the solitary man, who saw so many visions in the wandering snowflakes, would see no further pictures. Often as he went over the old ground, he checked himself always on the threshold of the final scene; for he had his chosen life to live, to live worthily, and that last, dishevelled, palpitating scene which closed the drama was not one to strengthen or to aid a man.

Rather he chose to look quietly at the past, to measure it by the philosophy of patience and of hard endurance which he had learned from this other life among the ling and bracken. What was the sum of the old life? What could it have brought him, supposing he had never left the beaten track? In that dead life he had done ill deeds, too many of them; he had done good deeds, a few; he had known passion, had understood those loves of women that have the deepest roots of all—love of a

strong mother for her only son, love of a strong wife for the strong man of her choice. All were gone by—love, passion, the hope that had turned liar when his heir was born, and died a few days after the mother who had given him birth. All were gone by; yet Lomax, who had been proud in those days, was now, at the end of all, not less than proud. Hope and love and joy had passed, but that stubborn will to fight remained.

Cold as the wind was, and drear the prospect, Griff stood at the hut door until the wintry sun shot forth, on the edge of gloaming, a jagged band of crimson; and now a glow of steady warmth stole over him, hiding his dispassionate outlook on the dead. He remembered how he had snatched himself from the waters of a great trouble, how he had come to Lostwithens here and given his challenge to the waste—to the waste reclaimed and lost so long ago by one of his own race. A few tools he had brought; for the rest, he had his naked hands, his naked stubbornness of purpose, and he had been a conqueror. Little by little he had killed remorse by power of the hill-winds and of labour; little by little he had lifted himself into the clean upper spaces where God recalls Himself to men, where forgiveness comes from toil, and indolence shows nauseous and unclean. Not at first had he learned these things; there had been the crying out of muscles craving rest, the brain-sickness that came at times when he had dug his trench, had turned the soil into it, had stopped to see the fruits of labour, and found his day's work but a scratch upon the wide face of the barren lands still left to till. Rheumatism, bronchitis, the lesser ills of blains and toothache — unheroic, maddening evils—had tried him, tempted him to rest when the wind blew east or the rains soaked through his skin. He had yielded to no tempter; and by and by, when he was proven, a still, great love was born in him; the far-off fathers sang in his blood, and now the victory was assured; he no longer worked to stifle thought—he worked for love of that "intake" whose witchery many

men have known. The moor was personal to him now; it was a giant stronger than himself, whom yet he would subdue. Each spadeful turned into its trench was a blow well driven home; each acre wrested from the heath was a gauntlet thrown for any man to see. He was making the blades of grass spring up where none had been before; and the moor surrounding him—and snarling, so it seemed, between its ragged jaws—was jealous of each blade that ripened to the hay-harvest.

It was this labour which gave Lomax his air of strength, of hard-bitten indifference to the fret of passion. For he had learned a deeper passion and graver issues than any which could be gleaned from human loves and hates; he had fought with nature, with bed-rock for a vantage ground, and he had sometimes conquered, and lesser strifes were dwarfed. Under the gathering snow out yonder lay the spoils of fight—good fields that once had been fruitless peat. The moor was master of the wider lands; but these were his by the primeval law of conquest.

He roused himself at last, and stood to his full height, and stretched the arms that were like branches of a well-timbered oak. His likeness to the moor was heightened now: big, both of them, with quietness hiding a tense power of storm; aloof, both of them, from the things of little consequence; both held, as it were, in the snow-grip, waiting for the warmer winds to blow which should caress the stubborn soil into a strange tenderness and stranger beauty.

"The old moor has its triumph now," said Lomax to his dog; "it will be my turn by and by."

His whole mind was set upon his labour. He had no thought—as how should he?—that this snowstorm was to weave new strands into the grey fabric of his days. Just such a storm had brought him disaster once; it was to come with fairer gifts, now that he had trodden weakness underfoot. Yet had he guessed the nature of these gifts, or known that the ambassador

would come in woman's gear, with eyes as deep as an autumn gloaming and a face that harboured weariness and pride, this man of loneliness would have put a bolt to his hut door and have sought safety on the farther side.

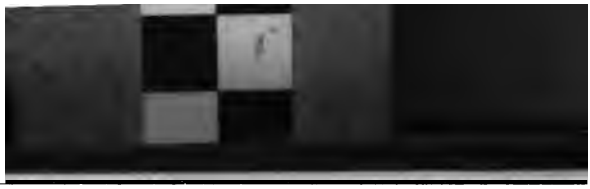
He had no inkling of the future, though. Nay, he laughed aloud as he looked, first at the intaken lands, then at the mistals and the stable which he had built with his own hands, delving for the stone, rough-hewing it, laying it block on block until his cattle and his horses had better house-room than himself.

"Trash, good lad, I'll not grudge the moor its triumph," he said. "Let it chain up the peat, if it will—I have done enough until the thaw comes."

He talked to his dog as to a fellow-human, and Trash had learned from long intimacy to understand, if not the speech, at least the meaning of the voice. He came now to Griff's side, and looked up into his eyes, and talked as best he could in praise of all that his master had accomplished. Then, with a sudden glance towards the mistals, he barked, and ran a few steps forward, and barked again. He was reminding Griff that the cattle had not yet been milked.

"Why, lad, I've been dreaming over long," cried the master. "It's not like me to forget the beasts."

The cattle turned their heads as he went in at the mistal door; they knew and loved him, and it was a good sight to watch him as he went from one to the other of them, patting their sleek heads, gossiping with them of the matters that are dear to kine, receiving as he moved from the roan to the white, from the white to the dappled Irish heifer, such welcome as a man gets rarely from his fellows. For Griff was of the larger nature now; the birds, the hares and rabbits, the cattle, all understood that quality in him which he had won from loneliness. He was not a man among the lesser brutes to-night; he was a friend and equal of the kine he loved.



Presently he took down the milking-stool from the window-ledge, a pail from the corner next the door; and Trash watched him gravely, as the milk ran warm and frothy at his touch, and sniffed in tranquil approbation of the steam which filled the byre. It was Griff's hour of luxury, this milking-time. The fragrance of the cattle's breath, the fragrance of the milk, the soft, contented mooing of his comrades, the lazy rattling of their chains—could he find more than this in gardens where the honey-hearted roses grew, and bees and birds made melody? Then, too, the mistal odours brought the old days back, not with a cold remembrance of sorrows past, but with a warm and satisfying sense that love and happiness were very near his elbow.

Perhaps Griff never prayed in words. He did not need to do, since all his days were working prayers. But at these hours, of morning and of evening milking, his heart was like a child's, and loneliness went from him.

"Steady, lass, steady! You would not waste the pailful?" he cried, as the Irish heifer gave a playful kick.

The heifer looked at him out of her velvety brown eyes, and Griff laughed at the mixture of regret and frolic in her glance.

"There, I knew you meant no malice. You're young yet, lassie," he murmured. "Never kick over good milk, as the woman's way is—"

He stopped and turned to the door, through which a sudden draught was streaming. On the threshold stood Gabriel Hirst, the preacher; and Griff's spirits fell, and a hand came out to clutch him back into the old waters of disaster; for Gabriel Hirst was the one man upon the moor who shared his secret.

A man worth looking at a second time, this Gabriel Hirst. A first glance showed only a sturdy, thick-set man of middle height, with a rough-hewn face and crisp black hair; but a second glance revealed a sort

of hidden beauty; for he had travailed with his own soul and with others', had watched upon the hilltops for the messages which afterwards he delivered red-hot from the pulpit, had gathered strength and wrath and pity from his own experience, and had given out the same with an unsparing hand. Few men had ever laughed at Gabriel, when he entreated them to righteousness; fewer still had been known to withstand him when he passed his spirit through the fire, and stood above his congregation, and thrust them through and through with assurance of damnation. In all his words, in all his deeds, this man was honest as the sunlight and the storm; and Griff, though he had no care for his teaching, had loved him as a brother since boyhood's days.

"What, Gabriel!" he cried. "You have come far afield. Shake the snow from your coat, man, and talk to me while I milk."

Gabriel Hirst came through the steaming mistal reek and held out his hand to the other; but Griff withheld his own.

"It is not clean, Gabriel," he said simply.

"Still the same tale, lad? I have seen you grow out of misery, Griff—seen you stand staunch and do your work here as I like to see a man do it—and yet you will never put hand in mine."

A change came over Griff. His eyes blazed with a queer light—defiant, proud, yet bitterly ashamed.

"Have I not told you that I will clasp hands with no man? I have done what I have done, Gabriel; work can give me peace—but it cannot clean my hands."

"Then there are no clean hands in Ling Crag," said Gabriel sturdily. "Listen to me, lad. What you did you did in madness. It is forgiven you. Am I one to say lightly to a man that his sins are forgiven? Nay, for I love you so, Lomax, that I would bid you stride the red-hot ploughshares if your soul's need asked for it."

"Ay, that you would," said Griff drily. "Your remedies were ever drastic, Gabriel."

Yet Griff's smile faltered soon as it came. The plain, childlike fashion of the preacher's talk revived old memories; thus had he ever been, this Gabriel Hirst, whose care was only for men's souls.

"There's no need now for sternness, lad. The iron has entered in, I tell you, and done its work; take peace in both your hands, Griff, and look to the one sure road."

Griff went on with his milking. He had no common ground on which to meet Gabriel the preacher; it was Gabriel the man whom he understood and cared for.

"Call it pride, Gabriel," he said at last, as he shifted his stool to the next stall. "I was proud once to offer my hand to friends—and now I am too proud to give it, knowing what I know."

"Pride," murmured the preacher, "pride that is short-lived as the grass! See you, lad, I've been across the moor to pray with old Nat Waterhouse: he's dying, and in grievous pain; and the sight of him has shown me once again what pride is worth. For he was proud, after his own stiff fashion."

"Yes, I have pride," said Griff impetuously, "and it's an honest one. Five hundred years we Lomaxes have been in Marshcotes, and since cradle-days I was taught that to be a Lomax was to have many a good man's honour in my keeping—my father's honour, and his fathers' before him. *And I soiled our honour.* Well, I've pride enough to keep my burden on my back."

Gabriel could do nothing with his friend of other days. Entreaty and argument alike were useless. What Griff knew, he knew—as he had said—and the scar, though covered up, was there.

"How is the wife, Gabriel?" went on the other, milking steadily.

"Greta? As bonnie as she used to be, lad, and she grows dearer every day. Sometimes I fear this great love; it seems to be robbing God."

"Then God will be glad to be robbed. Love is over and done with for me, Gabriel, but I can remember my own wedded days, when the wife's kiss was a righteousness, when— Lad, lad, enjoy your love-time while you may!"

His vehemence startled Gabriel, who did not understand that this milking-time was the hour of tenderness which Lomax snatched from his hard round of toil.

"Yet if it were robbing God? If it were the sin unpardonable?" repeated the preacher.

As Griff paused before answering, the mistal door swung open, and a lassie stepped into the circle of light. Supple as a hazel-twig, she carried her dark head high, and her eyes looked out from underneath a mass of tumbled hair.

"I've just been tidying your hut," she said. "I was later than I meant to be, for father needed me."

CHAPTER II

THE LASS OF WINDY FARM

HESTER ROYD, on entering the mistal, had seen only Griff; and now, as the preacher stepped out from the shadow of the stall, she threw back her head with mocking defiance. For Gabriel and she were known to each other, though her father's farm lay almost as far as Lostwithens from the beaten tracks.

"Won't you give me good-evening, Mr. Hirst?" said the girl, challenging him with her eyes.

"Good-evening, Hester. Surely it is no fit hour for you to be abroad—with snow on the ground, too, and more to follow." The preacher's voice was cold, and he met her glance in a way that suggested some old feud between them. And such in truth there was, for Hester, in her wild, careless way, had once dared to laugh at him when he rebuked her pagan flow of life and spirits.

"Thank you," the girl answered, with a pretty toss of the head, "but I know every inch of the track, and we are higher up at Windy Farm. I didn't know how deep it was until I left the sloping fields—the wind has swept the snow down from us to you. Well, Mr. Lomax, I didn't come to stay, once I had fettled up for you; only I saw the light in the mistal here, and thought I'd run in and tell you I had been."

"Gabriel is right, all the same," said Lomax, getting up from his stool and rolling down his sleeves. "You will be hard put to it to find the track, Hester, in this

light. See, I've done milking; I shall put you on your way."

The girl demurred, but Griff brushed her arguments aside, as he brushed everything aside which came between the making of a resolution and its fulfilment.

"In any case, I promised your father to bring some physic for the ailing heifer. You'll wait in the hut for me, Gabriel?" he said, turning to the preacher. "You have five miles to go, and you'll not win home to-night. I couldn't do it myself, well as I know the moor."

"I must be home to-night, lad," answered the preacher gloomily, "but I'll wait for you. The snow may have cleared by then."

Griff laughed the easy laugh of one who knows the weather. "Faith is a grand thing, Gabriel, but I would not trust to it this time. This storm, I tell you, has been brewing for a week; it has been creeping up and up—a dash of grey across the sky at first—a little sob in the wind—then quietness for a day—and then more grey in the sky, turning to a copper-blue, and a sense of listening all about the ling bushes—"

"Hearken!" put in Hester Royd, who feared neither man nor woman on the moorside, and who, alone of all the hill-folk, dared jest with the master of Lostwithens. "Hearken to the loving way he talks of it. Weather and intake—intake and weather—by the Heart, Mr. Lomax, if you knew as much about—some things—as you do about soil and weather, you'd be over-wise to live."

Griff laughed again, as if she were a spoilt child. "There are worse things to live with than soil and weather," he said.—"Gabriel, will you take the milk into the dairy? There's no time to be lost if Hester is to get back to Windy Farm to-night."

Trash, the dog, glanced restlessly from Griff to the preacher. He was asking whether he should go with his master, or whether he should stay and guard the farm against one who, to him at least, was an acquaintance rather than a friend.

"Come, lad!" said Griff, to settle his doubts; and Trash and Hester and the man went quickly out into the falling snow.

Gabriel Hirst looked after them for a while, then turned and carried the pails into the clean, cold dairy where Griff kept his milk until Hester came each week to make it into butter for him. It had been a hard blow to the preacher, this sudden coming of Hester—this coming as of one who was at home at Lostwithens. Dreamer, mover of men's hearts, a man proof, you would have said, against all worldly wisdom, Gabriel could yet be shrewd and practical as any man. He had seen many hearts laid bare before him; he knew more than he wished as to the ways of a lass with a lad; and the look in Hester's eyes to-night, as they sought for Lomax and found him amid the mistal reek, was one not to be mistaken by an onlooker. Griff had but to stoop—and who could say what a lonely man might do when a woman, young and warm and breathing, came day by day, for aught Gabriel knew, to teach him the solace of companionship? True, Griff seemed as hard as the nether millstone to all that lay outside his labour, his cattle, and the myriad glories of the heath; but would he not relent one day—relent so suddenly that all would go by the board, just as a sudden thaw will send the hill-snows racing to the valleys? Then he would marry this girl out of hand, and he would bitterly repent.

"Lad, lad, you married below your station once. You shall not do it again!" he groaned. "*She* was better than Hester, nearer your own mind; yet there was a kink in the marriage somewhere—I always felt it—and God took His own way of showing it by putting wife and child away in Marshcotes churchyard."

Gabriel Hirst, be he narrow as he would in the things of faith, predestination, and after-punishment, was just to the core of him. Whatever quarrel lay between Hester and himself, it did not influence his judgment

now. The girl would ruin Griff—Griff, with his splendid isolation, his kinship with the winds that blew, the blades that reared themselves to the summer skies. And so he went heavily about the business of pouring the milk into the pans; and even as he did so, he could not hold back a tribute of admiration for the way in which Griff ordered each detail of his farming life. For Gabriel himself was a prosperous farmer, of gentle birth, in the intervals allowed him by the Spirit.

He would have learned how wide his fears were of the truth had he moved behind Hester and her companion as closely and silently as Trash did. At first, as they crossed the yard and struck up into the moor, it seemed useless to trust themselves to this desert where the snowflakes danced before them, each pointing them in a new direction, each adding, as it fell, its mite to the great sheet of grey which hid the features of the moor's face. As it chanced, however, there was an old track, plain enough to be seen at ordinary times, which led from Windy Farm to the upper edge of Lostwithens; it had been made, folk said, when the Lomax who first settled at Lostwithens went, at dawn and dusk, to see the house where once the lass had lived who had enslaved him, played with him, and afterwards cast him off in favour of a younger rival. At any rate, the track did good service to-night in guiding the wayfarers to Windy Farm, for the heather stood deep on either side, and the snow was not thick enough as yet to hide the rough topmost beard of ling, and so the path was marked clearly enough, even in the grey-dark of the night, by the smooth and narrow ribbon of snow which covered it.

"You should have left my hut to take care of itself," said Griff, after they had gone half their way in silence. "It was no night to come abroad."

"I did not choose to stay at home. Do you think I fear the snow?"

"I think you fear nothing. You would fare better, lass, if you did fear something now and then. However, we can't miss the track."

She stopped and held both hands out to him. "They are cold," she said. "Rub them—you are always warm in any weather."

Griff obeyed her—took the firm brown hands in his own browner ones, and chafed them patiently. He did not notice that even at the first they were as warm as his own—tingling with the frost-glow following quick motion. Neither did he understand the girl's petulance, when at last she snatched her hands away and went forward quickly along the path.

"He's a fit man to tame the moor," she murmured. "Women may come, and women may go, and if they bid him warm their hands—why, he'll do it, but he'll never give a sign that he knows they *are* a lass's hands."

"What's amiss, Hester?" cried Griff cheerily. He was full of the witchery of the night, with its wayward flakes of snow, with its wind that sobbed and was afraid, with the sense it gave of sheeted wildernesses that lay and shivered as they touched, at each corner of the sky, the same cold snowbound heaven. Of the girl beside him he thought as little as of the narrow track by which they journeyed; she was a part merely, a little part, of the great, compelling world about him.

Again the girl stopped abruptly. "Mr. Lomax," said she, in a voice that was half curious, half fretful, "is it true that for heart you've got just a sort of madness for your intake, that for head you've got only the thought of intake—that for wife and bairns and a cosy hearth you're content to count up all the acres won from Lostwithens Heath?"

"Why, yes, it's true," said Griff, not greatly heeding this storminess, unusual as it was in his experience of her. "Each acre that I win I count a bairn—so yond little hut of mine must be overflowing fast. I shall have to be building by and by."

She tossed her head rebelliously. The man was so simple, so devout in this religion of intaking, that to mock him or be angry with him was as hopeful an enterprise as to throw one's self against a sturdy hill-top wall. Another silence fell between them.

"You can go back," said Hester suddenly. "A bairn could find the way from here."

"I'll see you all the way," answered the other, still with the same cheeriness, begotten of fine storm upon the fine, upstanding hills. "I have the bottle of physic for your father, too, and the heifer's in need of it."

"I can carry it."

"And so can I, and mean to.—See, we're at the Low Meadow wall by now, and a half-mile will see us home."

"You will not win back to Lostwithens. Remember how you hurried me away, saying than a half-hour more of snow would—"

"But then you're only a bit of a lassie," put in Griff. "I can give Ling Crag Moor twice this depth of snow, I fancy, and still be master of it."

This girl of impulse—impulse as unfettered as the winds and waters whose voices had been books to her since cradle-days—halted a moment in the path till Griff came up with her, then slipped a warm arm into his and moved forward with him, stride for stride, as if no spleen had moved her to walk on ahead.

"You like to be master of everything, it seems to me," she said. "You're mastering the heath; you are master to your dog there, and the cattle follow your lightest word. Well, would it be nothing to master a woman?"

Griff only laughed, as if again he turned a childish jest aside, but she went on.

"Would it be nothing to have a woman at your beck and call? One who would fetch and carry for you all the day—would lie down for a thrashing, like a dog, when she'd done wrong—would—"

"My good lass, what should I do with such a woman if I found her?" said Lomax simply.

She was silent for a while, then her voice came quick and deep—a voice that was as elemental in its passion as the snow-driven wilds about them.

"Then know this, Mr. Lomax," she said. "Till you've mastered a woman, you'll never be master of aught in this life. And when these acres of yours—you call them your bairns—when you and they have grown old together, see if they will come about your knee and help you to a good peace and a good dying. There's more in life than soil and crops—and you'll be dead before you've lived."

For the first time Griff really listened to her. The voice, the irresponsible, hot outburst, reminded him of all that rumour had to say of Hester's mother. The mother had been of gentler birth than Joshua Royd, the struggling farmer who kept up heart as best he might at barren Windy Farm; she had been delicate, passionate, fanciful; she had died young, but not soon enough to leave Hester altogether to her father's teaching. And so the girl had grown up, strong certainly and capable, but prone to listen to the wind-voices that once had played on her mother's heart as on an instrument of strings; and, when the day's hard work was over, Hester would betake her to the dingles through which the moorland brooks went bubbling, racing, singing, and she would lie beside the waters and learn the big lesson they could teach her—freedom. And now she had grown into her mould; she was clean, and passionate, and wilful, and when she sought her mate, it was certain that she would look for wooing of nature's fashion rather than the law's.

Something of this Griff realised to-night; but that he himself had any interest for the girl, save as a neighbour in a lonely place, he had no least suspicion. Little by little, as they walked, the storm had lessened, and now, for a brief space, the snowflakes ceased to fall. The wind, peevish before, grew shrill, triumphant; there was a scattering of clouds up in the murky night above them,

the sudden brightness of a star, as of an eye refreshed with sleep, and then the moon, round, blue, and full, came sailing over the long back of Dead Lad's Rigg.

Griff clutched the girl's arm tight, and pointed to the moor. He forgot everything in that moment except the glamour and the splendour of this night-cumbered wilderness. From edge to edge the land was white with frost-flakes glimmering far as the dazzled eye could follow them; old Bouldsworth Hill, who showed himself at most times as a great, blunt-headed giant overlording the bleak lands about him, was now a great ball of snow, smooth, round, and ready, so it seemed, to fall to pieces at the first puff of wind. The farther hills pushed white into the deep blue of the sky. The nearer clefts and rises were not white at all, but of that delicate snow-blue which has no counterpart in nature's colours. And still the moon rode up into the deep-blue wonder of the sky, and Charley's Wain hung low towards the north, his seven stars as bright almost as the Pole Star to which he was the guide.

Trash, the dog, began to bay at the moon so unexpectedly arrived, and here and there, far out across the moor, the farm dogs answered him, with voices crispened by the frost to an elfish sort of music. These, and the voice of the wind, now rising, now faltering to a whine, were all that broke the silence, so far as Hester Royd could tell; but to Griff, who had lived even closer than his companion to mother-earth, there was a score of undernotes — light tinkle of the ling-stems as they brushed against each other; sounds of the ghost-world which had learned to know him for a friend; the great, wide sighing of this heath who was striving to hold her fledgling children close against her wintry breast, that so they might find a little warmth to help them toward the coming spring.

But Hester was thinking of her own quick-racing blood, her own hopes and fears. She was young, and the human things of love and hate and circumstance

were dear as the untried land which lies, in a child's wanderings, just over the hill—always just over the next hill. So full she was of her own buoyancy and youth that she did not heed the man's abstraction, his evident delight in the big, impersonal play of frost and snow and starlit, infinitely receding sky.

"Mr. Lomax!" she said. And now it was not his hand on hers, but both her own upon his shoulders.

She said no more, but looked him frankly in the face. The moon shone full on her, and showed a head set proudly on straight shoulders, dark brows that stood, clear and wilful, above the darker eyes, a face which had the artless comeliness of an older race. Hester Royd stood there, herself, complete and unashamed; a lass to toil at the churn and know no weariness, a lass to rear men-children for tillage or for intake, a lass to make a good wife and a true to any man, though whimsies flitted like the dimples on a stream across the brightness of her eyes; last of all, a lass who knew neither good nor evil, but took her heart's word for it that impulse was at one with righteousness.

"Well, lass?" said Griff, with a friendly smile.

He simply did not understand that she had chosen him for her mate, that all she asked was to go to kirk with him—her mother's teaching had told her this much was needful—and afterwards to live beside him, doing what work she could for him, rearing his bairns, easing his pains when he was sick or weary. Too long aloof from such matters, too long assured, moreover, that he had left the world of men and women, Griff's heart was full of this wide stretch of heath which, once plain Ling Crag Moor, was now a jewelled wonderland where witchcraft lurked, where ghosts played in and out, where even the farm-dog's baying at the moon was like immortal music of the Phantom Hounds. And so he missed—missed utterly—the natural, quiet pathos that was flooding Hester's eyes with mother-tears.

Slowly her hands loosed their hold upon his shoulders.

Slowly her brave eyes drooped. And then the wind got up again and blew a scud of cloud across the moor's face; the snow began to wander in vague circles once again; and, as they went together up the meadow-path, and out into the pasture, and so to the gate of Windy Farm, the darkness hid the tears that were flowing faster than the snow, and full as cold, from Hester's eyes. But Griff, his first surprise forgotten that the girl should look into his eyes so earnestly and seem to ask a question, was full of the wonder of the snow-girt night.

"There's no place in the world, child, like Ling Crag Moor," he said.

And Hester, stifling her sobs, laughed mirthlessly. He was right in naming her "child," but at least she had the child's knowledge of what was foolish in her elders. Surely this once he might have taken his eyes from off the hills, and stooped to see the trouble of one little human soul!

"None," she answered. "At least, I hope there's not, for then so many other folk would be cold and wretched, and eager for the spring that never comes."

Farmer Royd's dog gave tongue at the moment, and Trash, cheerful at all times when standing in the way of battle, gave answer in a key that admitted no doubt as to his acceptance of the quarrel.

"See, there will be a fight," said Hester, glad of any chance to cover her own thoughts. "If you must come in, hold Trash, while I shut up our own dog in the scullery."

Griff said one word to Trash, which brought him, with little of a warrior's air, to his side; then he waited until Hester opened the house door—locks were not known at Windy Farm—and passed within. There was a sharp protest from the farm-dog, a running whine, then Hester reappeared.

"You can come in now," she called.

He crossed the stone porch, and followed her into such a glow of light and warmth as a man welcomes after a

snowy upland journey. There were no candles lit, but the fire had just been stirred anew, filling the one half of the house-place with rosy light, while in the other half it played strange pranks of hide-and-seek, now lighting up the face of the eight-day clock, now leaving it in mysterious gloom—a gloom from which its steady *tick-tack* came with a hollow, awesome sound.

By the hearth, in a great elbow-chair, sat Joshua Royd, his face, and the long pipe he was smoking, limned clear against the firelight. He turned as Griff came in and motioned with his pipe towards the chair that stood on the other side of the hearth.

"Welcome to you, lad; you've brought the physic for yond sick beast of mine, I see," he said, in his mellow, heartsome voice—a voice that not all the winds of Ling Crag Moor had been able to spoil. "Come you in, Trash, too; there's room for all. That silly lass of mine has driven Shep into the scullery. For why, I asked her? If the dogs want to fight, let 'em have done with it as soon as may be, and learn which is the master."

Hester was spreading a cloth upon the table, and only glanced up at her father as she went on with her work. "Is it all that men think of, father—which is the master?" she asked.

"Ay, lass, ay, pretty much. If there's two lads after one wench, you'll find they forget the wench altogether for a bit in settling which can knock the other head over heels. And then, when one of the two has wedded her, he'll spend a deal of useful time in proving that he's master of his wife. So you'll stay for a bite of supper, Mr. Lomax, and a cup of tea with it? That's neighbourly."

"Well, I should be back at Lostwithens, for Gabriel Hirst is waiting for me there; but Hester will pout if I leave without breaking bread."

Stricter than any of the unwritten upland laws is that which bids no guest go out without enjoying hospitality, and Griff had no thought of dishonouring

Windy Farm, though Gabriel might be growing impatient.

"So you've got Gabriel Hirst down yonder at Lostwithens?" went on the farmer, in the same assured and leisurely tone. "I'm old enough to recall Gabriel's father—old Tom Hirst, of Ling Crag, the first judge of a bit of horseflesh in Yorkshire—ay, and the hardest drinker, too, and jolliest fly-by-night, till he took religion. I've thought, just now and then, when Gabriel has been preaching wilder than ordinary, that breed will tell, and that the son might very well be swung back to the father's ways, if once a big shock came to him."

Griff nodded, but he did not tell the other of a wild night's work, hidden long since by the years, which had indeed brought out the naked Adam-man in Gabriel.

"Yet he seems set enough on preaching ways," said Joshua Royd. "I see him, time and time, when I'm crossing the moor from Marshcotes market; and he walks, as you might say, with his head among the stars, and never sees you if you rub against his elbow; and then I know he's laying up a store of fire and desolation for us come next Sabbath. Well, well, he asks too much of his body, does Gabriel Hirst. Only yestre'en, I happened on him at the foot of Lone Lass Dene; and he was sitting on a birchen trunk that had fallen by the stream, and his eyes were out and away, and his body still as Doom; and when I touched him, he shivered, like, at first, and looked at me with a grey face and wandering eyes—and then he put a hand across his forehead—and I could see he scarce knew where he was, nor how he'd come there. I don't hold with work of that sort; let a man take it slow and take it steady, whether he be farmer or whether he be preacher, and both soul and body will thank him for it by and by."

"Supper is ready, father," said Hester, adding the last touches to the board.

How like old days it was, Griff thought, as he drew up to the table, with Hester at his elbow to offer buttered

cakes or cracknels, with the kettle singing on the wreckan, with the little black pot of rum sitting cosily cheek-by-jowl with the bigger teapot. In all things needful, the courtesy of these hosts who dwelt upon the edge of desolation was perfect; what they had of their best to give was at Griff's service, and it was offered with that curious, rich kindliness which long ago had endeared the moor-folk to him. Here on the uplands all honest men were equals, and as equals they dispensed or accepted hospitality with unobtrusive grace.

Not often nowadays did Griff accept such hospitality. It was rarely that he felt himself the equal of such as Joshua Royd, though he was in point of law his overlord. To-night, however, there were softer forces stirring in him. He let his eyes roam from corner to corner of the room; he had a tender glance for the bits of pewter, the delfen mugs, the tea-cannisters, ranged two and two along the mantelshelf; he halted for a while at the settle, rich brown with the polishing of many corduroys, which hid the door and its attendant draughts. But most of all his glance dwelt on Joshua Royd, and watched the firelight pale and glow across his strong-cut face. It was stamped with the likeness common to the men of Ling Crag Moor, this face, but it had a rugged beauty and a character all its own. Scrupulously shaven, strong of jaw, high of forehead, grey and trusty of eye, the whole fashion of it bespeaking pride, and strength to persevere, and tenderness toward weaker things; face and figure alike, moreover, telling of the calm that comes of right living and of strength well used through years of toil.

Such men as Joshua had been kindly elders to Lomax as a lad; such thick-walled farm dwellings as this had known him as a constant visitor, whenever he found himself returning, say, from shooting hares or conies, or from hunting with the mad company of riders who followed to hounds as reckless as themselves. The old kindly atmosphere returned to Griff, as not long ago

the reek of the mistal had brought home bygone days to him. He was aware of another presence, too—that of his mother, tall, active, vigorous of word and deed, who had helped him toward his manhood. And then the question struck at him out of the warmth and comfort of the scene, "With such a mother and such men as Joshua Royd about him, how had he come to shipwreck?" And he thrust the question from him savagely.

Joshua had been chatting all the while of this and that, but chiefly of the brave days gone by, when Stephen Royd, a richer and better-blooded kinsman of his own, had wooed little Barbara Cunliffe of Wynyates; and, farther back, when Griff's own father, and wild Squire Daneholme of Saxilton, and old Tom Hirst himself, had made the days go merrily from edge to edge of the great moor.

Hester, for her part, was silent, save when some courtesy of service was needed; and when at last Griff got to his feet and summoned Trash from his well-earned dreams of hares, the girl opened the door for him in silence. It was only after he had gone forward a few paces into the snowy night that she found voice again.

"You'll be careful of the road?" she whispered, following him, and laying a light hand on his arm.

"Why, child, yes. It is plain enough."

"Because—because—you mind the Snow-White Women who ride on these winter storms, and lead poor travellers astray, and blind them with the snow-sleep?"

"I have heard of them, but never saw one yet. Trust me to keep my eyes upon the path instead."

"*I have seen them*," said Hester simply. "Have a care of your feet."

With that she was gone, and Griff swung forward, through the farmyard, down the meadow, and so into the track which still showed white and ribbon-like between the ragged beards of ling on either hand. And, as he

went—with no thought, such as forgotten knowledge might have taught him, of all that Hester's silence and solicitude might mean—the quick reaction came from the friendliness which he had shared up there at Windy Farm. From out the snow-driven night his secret came and stood before him, alive and glowing. How dared he sit with honest men and share their fellowship?

He met his trouble as he, and many another of his race before him, had done in other days. He stood, with the night and the storm about him, and he sent out his mind to the sky-roofed wastes, and he gleaned strength from the forthright hill-lands which pity not, nor praise, nor judge. Then, like one who has swept away a night's delusions at the first plunge into a moorland stream, he went forward on his way. He lived in the present, not the past.

Yet even more he lived upon the threshold of the future; for, while he stood at his hut door and paused for a moment with whimsical remembrance of Hester's fears, there was in very truth a Snow-White Woman coming through the storm to seek him.

Meanwhile he went indoors, and found Gabriel Hirst impatiently awaiting his return.

CHAPTER III

A FOREWARNING

GABRIEL HIRST was standing over against the hearth when Griff pushed open the door of his hut and went inside with a great stamping of snow-weighted boots.

"I'm glad you have come back, Griff. I have a word for you," said the preacher, looking round.

"A score of words, lad, if you like," answered the other cheerily; "and, faith, you've time for them, for you cannot cross the moor to-night."

"I must attempt it—"

"Nonsense! It is all very well to cross up to Windy Farm, but there'll be three times the depth between here and Ling Crag—and ugly drifts to be reckoned with as well, drifts that no man could guess at in a light like this. Did you not warn the wife that you were coming far and might be overtaken by the storm?"

"Why, yes; but Greta is always troubled when I am kept abroad at night. She hears voices in the wind, and thinks they have come to tell her I am lying dead away out on the moor."

It was a good sight to see the change in Gabriel's face when he talked of his wife; the sternness vanished, and exquisite, quiet lines of tenderness, playfulness almost, would come to light.

"Better that than have you really lying out on the moor, with snow for blankets. No, Gabriel, here you bide to-night; and to-morrow, if the snow has stopped, I'll take you safely to Ling Crag. Now, lad, sit you in

that chair, and I'll make shift with this block of oak that serves me as a table."

He rolled the block to one side of the primitive fireplace, seated Gabriel in the chair with a kindly pressure of both hands on his shoulders, then lit his pipe and sent out great clouds of smoke.

"I am in the great world to-night, Gabriel," he laughed. "First two visitors arrive; then I go out to supper; and now I have a guest for the night, who is going to talk of old days to me. I have not been so gay, lad, for longer than I can remember."

Gabriel looked round the little hut—noted the neatness of everything, the cleanly bareness of this place which was a shelter only, not a house to be furnished with one single item more than need demanded. For bed there was a heap of dried ling, covered with rough blankets; the oaken log, on which Griff was sitting at the moment, could serve as a table only to one who spent little time upon his meals. The kettle—a ponderous affair, for Griff would sometimes take the precaution of a hot bath after a day's labour in the rain—stood near the fire, and close to it was a panful of cold oatmeal porridge. In the chest by the door, so Gabriel rightly guessed, were such utensils as the lonely man would need—a teacup or two, a few plates, a knife and fork. Nowhere was there a touch of luxury; it was the dwelling clearly of a man who found his home outside yonder, where peat and heather were the house-floor, and the roof was sky, and the walls were framed of the east winds and the west, the north winds and the south. Nay, to look at Griff now—sitting with folded arms, his head thrown back, his eyes so curiously full of sky and sun and storm-wrack (as if these things were all reflected there), it was plain that no house built with hands could hold him long.

"It is a trim-kept place enough, Griff," said the preacher, "though I'm puzzled to know how it holds that big body of yours."

"There is so little to keep trim that it is easily done; but, for all that, Hester Royd makes shift, as women do, to find fault with my care of it, and so she has taken to coming down, twice in the week or so, to tidy up. She is almost the only human thing I see, Gabriel, week in and week out, unless I walk to Windy Farm for the length of a pipe with old Joshua."

Again the look of anxiety came into the preacher's face at mention of Hester Royd; but he did not speak of her as yet.

"Is it good for a man to live alone?" he said, after a pause. "The Scriptures tell me not, Griff."

Griff opened his brawny chest, and looked into the other's eyes, and laughed. "Is it good?" he echoed. "Do I look as if it hurt me, lad? Do you remember how I came here first—a broken man, with the life and the hope and the heart all dead in me? And I did not know, when I set to work, that the sky and the wind could heal me—I had to learn; and now—I would choose solitude of my own free will if I had to start my life again. There are no shams on the heath, Gabriel; there is no fretting; the moments go right forward, each with its own work, its own needs, its own nearness to the big motions of the world. I tell you, lad, there is never silence or loneliness up here; for day and night you hear the looms of God go thundering at their toil."

The real Griff was peeping out in the warmth of the moment. He talked, he looked, he felt, thought Gabriel Hirst, like a man who has found some true way of religion. Yet how could that be? Could wind and sun and soil be reckoned any sort of good exchange for the faiths that Griff had lost in boyhood, the faiths by which he, Gabriel, guided and made beautiful his life? For the first time the preacher could not find a harsh, quick negative to his own question; for did not Griff, sitting there in his confident strength, with the clean, unworldly light in his grey eyes—did not Griff himself give

proof that there was good in this faith which was in him?

They sat in silence for a while; then Gabriel Hirst looked up from the peats.

"Lad," he said, "you will not be alone here for long. There is a change coming to your days."

"And who will share my solitude?" asked Griff, with dry wonderment.

"I cannot tell you, save that it will be a woman."

"Gabriel, Gabriel! you have wrestled with the Flesh too long of late, or preached too long, or both. I have done with women long ago, and you know it."

"I have wrestled too long, as you say," went on the other quietly, "and after long strife with the Adversary on the hilltops, I am apt to fall into weakness, Griff. I lose my hold of the things of sense, and I see into a world beyond; and it is at such times that folk say I have 'the sight,' though God knows I welcome no such power—nay, I am not sure that it is not meddling with the secrets of the Evil One. Hark ye, lad! These trances are different altogether from those times when the Gift of Tongues comes on me like a whirlwind, when I feel the Word and know my power to speak it to men's uplifting—*then* I am master of myself, but at these other times I am weak and in another's keeping."

Griff listened with patient tenderness. Even the half-smile on his face was a loving one, for was not this the Gabriel Hirst he knew so well, with his honesty, his unalterable faith, his sober, matter-of-fact talk of things mysterious and sacred? Ay, in its own way, the preacher's religion was as sublime as the frosted wilderness which shut him in to-night; each was complete, and neither faltered.

"Yesterday, as it drew near gloaming-tide, I fell into one of these trances," went on the other. "All day I had been upon the moors, praying, searching, striving, to the end that I might awaken those in Ling Crag whose souls

were sleeping. And at gloaming, I know not how, the strength went from me utterly, and I sat upon a fallen trunk, and I saw a vision. I was at Lostwithens here, Griff, and you were resting after labour with the spade."

"That is true enough," said the other, finding that Gabriel had paused a while. "I finished a trench at dusk, and stood to enjoy the sight of a good day's work."

"You stretched your arms out, and you smiled, and, though I could not hear the words, you seemed to be thanking God for your life of loneliness. Then the sky clouded, and out of it came wandering flakes of snow, that thickened, thickened constantly. Then I looked behind you, and there was a figure stealing over the moor—a woman's figure, with covered head—and it came down and down past your hut door, across the newly intaken land, until it stood close behind you. And there it stayed, though you did not turn to see it; and the snow grew thicker; and then the vision left me, and I awoke to find myself in Lone Lass Dene, with a cold wind blowing through me. Well, the snow has come, lad, and with it will surely come the woman also; and, because I did not know whether ill or good was brewing for you, and because I was troubled, Griff, lest you should be in any danger—the vision was so clear—I came to-night to warn you of it, to give you counsel, maybe, if you need any such."

Griff was no sceptic when either ghosts or visions were in case; his father's blood was in him, superstitious blood, and he had, moreover, seen and heard strange things during these long years of fellowship with nature. Yet for all that he could not but smile at Gabriel's earnestness; for it seemed beyond belief that a woman should ever again have the least share in the life which he had carved out for himself.

"Women, surely, have to be sought," he said at last. "They do not come knocking at the doors of lonely

huts, Gabriel, and say that they've a mission to twist the order of our days aside—"

"They come, or they are sought; it lies in God's hands," put in the preacher. "And, Griff, when I reached here to-day, so full of the vision, when I saw Hester slip into the mistal, as if at home with you—why, I feared for you, lad. Hester Royd may be this and that, but she is no mate for you."

Again Lomax laughed. This friend of his was harping so faithfully upon a string that had no note for Griff's ear.

"Come, Gabriel, you can put Hester out of your mind, at any rate," he cried. "What should a slip of a lass have to say to a weather-beaten elder like myself?"

But Gabriel shook his head; he recalled the look, outspoken, not to be mistaken, which the girl had flashed at Griff out yonder in the byre. And when his host took up the porridge-pan, and set it on the glowing peats, and began to stir it gently with the thible, the preacher's face was anxious still.

"Better bide for a mate than take the first snod lass who comes seeking you," he said.

"Better be sure, as I am sure, that I have found my mate. Lostwithens Heath shares bed and board with me, Gabriel; I need no other wife."

They settled down by and by to the porridge, Trash taking his equal third share, and Griff mixing himself a glass of rum and water to crown the feast. This last was an unusual indulgence, prompted by the sight of a friendly face, and by the gossip of old days into which they had slipped. Gabriel Hirst forgot his visions, his doubts; his heart too warmed to many a kindly recollection of the past, and he told his comrade how the world had gone with this or that acquaintance. For, scattered as the farms and hamlets were which bordered Marshcotes and Ling Crag, the dwellers in them were known to one another through constant meetings at market, kirk, or tavern, as surely as if they were members of one

common household. If Betty o' th' Nab had the tooth-ache, the parish knew of it; and larger issues, of love and hate, of tragedy or comedy, were as well known to the moor-folk as if each man carried his own record in his face. It was these intimate, quiet details concerning people known long ago, and half forgotten now by stress of labour and of absence, that made Gabriel's gossip so welcome to his host to-night. There was a twang, sweet and sturdy as a western wind, about all this talk of man and maid and child; it seemed strange to Griff, for the moment, that he should have dwelt so long apart.

"Then there's poor Ephraim Shackleton," said Gabriel, following a fresh scent. "He has lost his wife, and is mourning her as if he'd treated her better while she lived. Well, well, he is ready enough to do her bidding, now that she lies in her shroud and waits her burial. Only yestermorn she died, Griff; and in the evening, when I got home after recovering from that trance I told you of, Ephraim came to me. 'It's snowing,' he said, 'and my wife's last words to me were that she must be buried snug and safe in Trawdon kirkyard; and I promised it with the last word that went between us.' He was troubled lest the snow should fall too thick and block the roads before the burying-day."

"He had reason," put in Griff, nodding gravely. "You will not get home to-morrow, Gabriel; the next day you may, but this snow will be the biggest seen on Ling Crag Moor for years. I've watched it coming, and—*I know*."

"Then we shall have to work. To comfort him, I promised that, if the roads were blocked, I would get the Ling Crag men together and we'd clear the five miles of road for him."

Griff's eyes lit up. "Good lad!" he cried. "That is my sort of work—fighting the moor. I'm with you, Gabriel, if there's need for it."

"Poor Ephraim!" went on the preacher. "Do you remember how hard-driven he was to choose between the lass that's gone and Betty o' th' Nab?"

Griff laughed, for this courtship had been a staple jest once on a day throughout the moorside.

"Well, Betty has been in and about all through the illness, and afterwards. Ephraim will try them both, if I'm not mistaken, before he has done. There, there! You lead a man's tongue on, lad, and it is unseemly to jest when talking of a death. Good-night, Griff; I'm tired and full of sleep."

"Lie you down on the bed there, then; it's rough but warm, Gabriel."

"Not I! I'll keep my chair here—"

For answer, Griff took him by the arm, with that odd, compelling power of command which of old had given him the ascendency over tough Gabriel Hirst.

"I shall do well enough," said Lomax. "I have learned to sleep anywhere."

He went to the hut door and crossed the threshold, Trash following at his heels. The snow had cleared for a moment once again, and the stars shone out upon the wilderness. There was scarcely a touch of frost in the night, and the breeze, lowered to a whisper, was full of that warm scent of spring which sometimes comes in time of snow. Slowly, as he watched the wakeful stars, the stark, white moor, Griff was aware of fate. No trance, of the sort that mastered Gabriel Hirst, could touch him; but in his way he had "the sight," as all have who live naked to the naked winds. Clearly, as if a voice had spoken to him, he knew that he was standing at the cross-roads of his destiny. A new power was to come into his life; he was to be alone no longer; the long years of his toil, lonely amid the lonely waste, were to take on new colour, new significance. But not just yet. Slow as his work had been, so the coming change would come with leisurely step.

"It will not be by a woman," he said.

Yet, even as he spoke, the wind got up and laughed. The moor-reaches, dumb beneath their shrouds, sent myriad twinkling sparks of light from their frozen

summits. This man had fought despair, and numbness of heart, and utter loneliness of spirit; he had fought the heath; and in these battles he had conquered. But who should conquer him, for his well-being or his sorrow, only the moor knew—the moor, and the star-crammed dusk of heaven.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE KIRK STONE HID

THERE was no slackening of the snowstorm on the morrow; rather it seemed as if the flakes were bigger, their haste to fall more marked. The hut itself, meanwhile, grew noticeably warmer. Built under shelter of the higher ground that shut Lostwithens in, the snow had slipped, pile upon pile, on to its heather-thatch, till now the little building was blanketed as snugly as Gabriel Hirst had been last night.

All day it fell, and Gabriel kept going to the door, as if by overlooking the weather he could change its purpose. It was plainly out of the question to move abroad as yet; but he thought of Greta, waiting for his coming, and impatience got the better of him at every moment.

"The wife will know well enough that you have found shelter somewhere on the moor," said Griff. "Trust her, lad; she is wise enough not to fret, when fretting can do no sort of good."

And the preacher would grow quiet again, until another swirl of wind would come across the waste, reminding him that drifts were being laid for the unwary in every hollow; and again impatience would get the better of him, for the end of the storm seemed remote as summer itself.

All night, too, the snow fell, but on the next day Griff woke to find the sunlight streaming in at the one window of the hut. The sky was blue, the breeze a soft and

playful one; only the smothered land bore witness to the fury of the storm.

"We can start as soon as we please, Gabriel," said Lomax, as they supped their breakfast-porridge.

"I'm with you, lad," said the other, finishing his meal and reaching out for the oaken staff which was the faithful comrade of his wanderings abroad.

Trash frolicked round them as they set off into the clean, cool, sunlit air. He had no eye for the grandeur of the scene, and longed only for a scamper after these days of forced inaction; and his noisy challenge to the wind was in sharp contrast to the silence of the men.

Gabriel, for his part, was thinking of his promise that a way should be cut to Trawdon, so that Ephraim Shackleton's wife might be buried in accordance with her dying wishes; but Griff was mindful of the message which had come to him two nights ago as he stood at the hut door and watched the starshine and the snow. He looked about him, and again his heart thrilled with the sense that a new day had dawned for him. Long accustomed to measure all things by the weather and the aspect of the heath, the scene in itself had power to work on him; his pulses moved with the moor's in these days, and the drama of his life was interwoven with the drama of this land of rock and peat and barrenness.

"Lord God, the majesty of it!" he cried, with a sudden grip of Gabriel's arm.

White, lone, and terrible the scene stretched out, hiding the subtler features of the moor, changing the biggest hills into a dwarfed and humpbacked likeness to their older selves. The blue sky and the sun lit up the whiteness and the loneliness, but only to increase the dumb, brute awe of it. League on league the untrodden whiteness strode, and every flake that glittered in the sun was virgin. It was this virginity which was the keynote of the scene to Griff. The moor was a white page, on which no man had written yet; it waited for the writer's coming.

Yet, even as Gabriel and he made up into the heath, following the less-cumbered ridges at every turn, the writing had begun. Their footmarks made it with each step; away to the west of them another pair of footmarks, smaller and less deep, was tracing a line across the waste; and the night, which waited patiently till day was done, was ready to put page and page together of these two writings on the snow.

Meanwhile, Griff needed all his knowledge of the moor, and all his care, to guide them safely to the village. It was well that his friend and enemy, old Ling Crag Moor, was familiar to him as to any grouse or hare or keen-eyed peewit; for he knew the height of each cross-running ridge—showing at rare intervals a beard of ling above the snow, which, in the hollows, would have hidden them to the thighs—and it pleased him strangely that even in this he could outwit the moor and walk almost with ease where every deeper hollow was a snare.

Yet it was slow going; and still the sun-tipped crystals mocked him; and still the desert showed no hope of habitation. On they went—the grouse so hungry and forlorn that they scarce shifted from his path—until at last they came to a second wilderness—a wilderness of snowfields, crossed by black lines of wall on the leeward side, and on the wind side held by heaped-up banks of snow. They had gained the tillage-lands that bordered Ling Crag village on the south; and now they had no friendly ridge to help them, but fought their way as best they could—knee-deep sometimes, and sometimes sinking to the waist—until they reached the brook that watered Conie Crag Ravine.

"We'll take to the water, lad," laughed Griff; "it will lead us straight into the Ling Crag highroad."

Gabriel waded in after him, and Trash followed gingerly, complaining of the cold. Another mile of this bleak water-road brought them into the highway which runs from Ling Crag out to Colne, and here Griff stopped,

dismayed for the first time. A hilltop road it is, and bitter cold when the wind roars down between the channel of its bordering walls, sweeping the snow before it. To-day the keen sunshine showed six-foot drifts piled high to the level of the walls; only in the middle of the way—a breadth of a foot or two—the snow hollowed to a rounded channel, and even there the depth was past a tall man's compass.

"This is the road you've promised to clear, Gabriel," cried the other. "Well, we shall have our work cut out—and meanwhile, we must take to the stream again."

They plunged in afresh, passed under the little brigg of stone that in summertime was gracious with the waving blue of harebells, and threaded their way between the shivering, snow-topped alders until a bend of the streamway brought them close to the highroad once again. From above them came the sound of many voices.

"Some folk can make their way along the road, Griff. Why not we?" said the preacher, pointing in the direction of the voices.

They left the stream accordingly, mounted the bit of brink-field in between, and climbed the snow-topped wall that divided field and highroad. A strange sight met them there; for all the men in Ling Crag village, so it seemed, had gathered to this hilltop road; and each one had a spade, and all were labouring as men work at harvest-time, when rain is threatening. Foremost of all was Ephraim Shackleton himself, who seemed young to be a widower.

Griff looked toward Wyecollar, and saw the banked waste of snow—looked toward Ling Crag, and saw the path which was lengthening slowly beneath the spades—looked at the men below him, and saw the sweat pour off them like rain from well-thatched mistal roofs. Then he understood that these folk—twoscore or so, there might be—were labouring for love, to the

end that one dead woman might find a lodging-place to her liking.

"They are before us, Gabriel," he said. "Come, let's find a couple of spades."

The men, too engrossed to heed the new-comers before, looked up when Griff and his companion jumped into the highway.

"Good-day to you, Mr. Hirst," said Ephraim soberly. "Your wife told me you were snowed-up somewhere on the heights, but I minded what you said about digging out a road; and I went to every man in Ling Crag, and told him what you'd promised—and not one of them said no."

"I knew they wouldn't, Ephraim. Well, on you go, while I run home and tell my wife I am safe. I'll be back here before you've had time to miss me."

He was already moving along the cleared space of road, eager as a new-made lover to put his arms about his wife. A curious silence followed his departure. On the one hand stood Griff, a dweller in the wilderness, a stranger to his kind; on the other, eyeing him furtively, were the stalwart men of Ling Crag village, who had known and loved him as a lad, but who despaired of him in these queer latter days. Once, they told themselves, he had been "wild young Lomax of the Manor"; all his forebears, in their day, had been wild young Lomaxes; but not one of them till now—except the kinsman who had dwelt long since at Lostwithens—had rejected home and neighbours, choosing to live his own life in the wilderness.

In that moment Griff understood the dividing gulf of these last years; he understood that he came among his kind again with an uncanny repute, as if he had been some ghostly dweller in the wastes of boggart-haunted marshes. Yet his first words were practical enough.

"Where shall I find a spade, neighbours?" he asked.

"At the Eagle Inn yonder," said Ephraim. "And

now, lads, we'll be making a start again, for it's a fairish step from here to Trawdon."

The curt greeting, after years of absence, was characteristic of the folk, and Griff was moved beyond his wont. The whole rough band of them, with their remembered faces, their remembered doggedness in the doing of a good deed in season, roused a hundred long-repressed, a hundred well-nigh forgotten, feelings in the exile. They were blood of his blood, these heath-born men, and he was among his own folk again.

Silently he went to the laithe of the Eagle Inn, picked out the broadest spade, and rejoined the workers on the road. Gabriel Hirst was here again by this time, too, but it was Griff who took the lead. There were not wanting strong arms and sturdy hearts to-day; yet Lomax was worth any two of them so far as eager labour went. It was not for naught that he had laboured lonely; it was not for naught that he had learned the personal, fierce joy of combat with the moor. He was warmed by the sense of comradeship, moreover, and those who halted for a while to gain their breath looked at the brawny arms of him, his ceaseless, easy swing, and muttered that Griff's madness had made a man of him.

All day they worked, and Trash sat watching a scene that was altogether new to his experience. Trash could not understand why his master chose to stay on the cold road, instead of walking briskly home across the moor, where man and dog could sit with a roof above them and a warm peat fire in front. He was a patient beast, however, and he sat there, shivering a little under his mud-coloured coat; now and then he whimpered, and once or twice he ran among the workers, and looked into their faces with his roguish, brilliant eyes; but they were over-busy to notice him, or to answer his dumb questions as to why and wherefore, and Trash would seat himself again, and watch, and wonder.

The sun went down, a clear-cut ball of blood, behind

the soft green-blue that edged the western heath. And still they plied the spade. A star came trembling from the pink and grey which roofed the distant black of Marshcotes village. The snow flew right and left unweariedly as the cleared space grew longer and the banks rose high and higher on either side. Nature was still as Destiny; the men worked silently amid the silent snow; and the corpse for which they toiled was scarcely quieter than the scene upon this hilltop road.

"Stiff work, lads!" murmured the preacher once, as he stopped to dash the sweat from his face.

"I've known stiffer," answered Griff, and went forward with his tireless swing.

Soft as a shadow fell the wintry gloaming, though still the whiteness of the snow forbade the dark to come too near. And now at last the throb of silence found an echo in the hearts of these rough folk; the wind was dumb, and the snow was dumb, and all the world seemed waiting for some trumpet-call of fate.

"She's watching us, I doubt," said Ephraim softly.

It was an instinctive touch of poetry, and all understood that he was thinking of the wife so lately dead.

"Nay, she's above and beyond the sights of this sad world," said Gabriel Hirst, the preacher.

"I doubt you, Mr. Hirst," went on the other, still in the same awed voice. "She was over-full of her doings to wend far from the house-place yonder. She'll not be easy, like, unless she can flit in and about the kitchen, seeing that the apple-pasties are baked brown enough, and that I don't knock my pipe-ash out on to the hearthrug, and that there's somebody to keep my wits in place with nattering. Nay, she couldn't bide, couldn't the lass, outside of Ling Crag parish—and she's above us now, I tell you, neighbours—and she knows we're working all for her—and it makes a kind of sweetness for a chap."

Again they bent to work, until the snow grew greyer,

and the star above Marshcotes kirk glowed brighter, and a breath of wind trailed like a sigh between the darkening boundary walls. And then there came from Ling Crag a troop of women, with children clutching at their skirts. Some carried pails of tea, some brought little pots of rum, and the children hugged baskets of oat-bread, cheese, and pasties; for time was everything, and these good fellows took their tea on the open road, between one long bout of spade-work and the next.

It was, in a grim way, a holiday for Ling Crag gossips, and the women were full of anxious chatter. Ephraim, as the dead woman's husband, was a hero for the nonce, and while the workers—too sharp-set with hunger to have time for talk—fell to upon the pasties and oaten cake, their wives were full of praise for the appearance of the corpse, full of question as to whether a road could be made in time as far as Trawdon.

"Well, I will say, Ephraim," said a lean little body in a shawl as white as the snow itself, "she makes as bonnie a corpse as ever I set eyes on. Fair like a picture she looks, and the linen is finer than you'll find at half the buryings in the moorside."

"Eh, eh, poor soul," put in another. "We must all flit one day, and it's good to think of starting in fine linen. I mind when Miser John o' Peggarty Rise buried his wife; he would liefer spend a prayer than a penny any day, would Miser John, and he prayed a fearful deal, they tell me. But prayers buy no linen shrouds, and his wife was laid away in cotton-stuff."

"Ay, I mind. It was ten years come Martinmas, for the roan cow died on the very day she was buried," said the lean little body.

"Well, she never lay quiet, didn't Miser John's wife, and all because she had no such wearing-gear as a respectable corpse has a right to ask for."

"She walked, like, did she?" asked the lean woman.

"Ay, she walked. Night after night she got her up

out of her bit of a bed in Marshcotes kirkyard, and she crossed the moor to Peggarty Rise, wet or fine—"

"Well, as for that, it wouldn't matter so much," put in the lean body. "Ghosts walk dry-shod, so they say."

"Dry-shod or wet-shod, she crossed the moor," went on the other, with slow relish of her tale; "and every night Miser John would waken up and hear her crying fit to die beside the old four-poster bed. 'What ails thee, lass?' says he. 'I'm in a shallow grave,' says she, 'and cotton-stuff is hard against my skin,' she says. Night after night she came, till Miser John grew daft-like with the fright; and he fell to sitting at her grave, counting out his guineas, and counting them, and counting them, till at the last they found him there one morn stretched dead and cold, with a sight of golden money spread among the daisies.—Well, Ephraim," she broke off, with sudden briskness, "she was a good one, was thy wife, and you mustn't fret, for she's earned her bit of rest."

Griff had withdrawn a little, and stood looking at these figures dimly seen against the grey-white snow. He knew each voice, the outline of each figure; he understood that eerie mixture of tenderness, and superstition, and brute hard-headedness, which formed the Ling Crag character; and again for a little while he took his fill of fellowship, and let lang syne come back.

"Who's yond?" said the lean little body by and by, pointing to Griff's silent figure. "He has a look of wild young Lomax, what with his height, and his legs like trees, and his way of carrying his prideful head. But there! Griff Lomax will never be found doing a Christian job, if all I hear be true."

"Yes, he is for once," cried Griff, with his big, half-forgotten laugh; "when a Christian job is a spading job, I can do it as well as Gabriel Hirst himself."

"So you've come back for awhile, Mr. Lomax," said the little body, with instinctive return to the deference of

old days—the days when Griff Lomax was, in fact no less than in name, Lord of the Manor of Marshcotes.

"For awhile, Nanny," he said simply. "It is good to hear the old voices again."

"Oh, is it?" retorted Nanny tartly. "Well, they're here to be hearkened to, for aught I know, if folk would only leave their queerish ways and come among us once again."

A lassie, rising ten or thereabouts, left her mother's skirts, and came and stood in front of Griff, and tried to read his face by the light of the snowshine and the stars. For Griff in these last years had grown to rank with the mad folk and the gnomes who held the cottage-hearths in thrall on winter's nights. None could understand that one of gentle birth should choose a task so heart-breaking as his; none could understand that any man, gentle or simple, should live apart from all his fellows and shun the clasp of hand on hand; and so, by slow degrees, they had come to regard him as "fairy-kist," and looked for him to die of his great labours, and, when he did not, reared him to a rough-hewn pedestal and fancied him half monster and half god.

For this reason the child stood before him and looked up into his face, and trembled with a fear that was only less than her child's curiousness. As for Griff, a human warmth came once again to thaw his frozen heart, for he thought of his dead boy, and of the bygone sweetness.

"You're fairy-kist," the lassie said, as if she spoke of something past all argument.

Griff put his arms about her, and lifted her, and kissed her as if she were his own, and not another's. And then the child knew his tenderness, as children do, and nestled to his shoulder. And when Gabriel Hirst cried out that no more time was to be wasted, it was with tears and protestations that she let this big, sweat-dripping fellow loose her hands, and set her down, while he bade her think of him in days to come.

Slowly, and looking backward often, the women and

the children left them, and Gabriel thrust his spade into the bank of snow before him.

"It's bright as candlelight even now," he said, "and by and by we'll have the moon to help us, lads."

Forward they went, spadeful by spadeful, foot by foot, yard by yard. Griff knew the dogged, hopeless feeling of it well—better than any of these men who worked with him. The sick immensity of all that lay before—the littleness of what they had achieved—such work was no new thing to him. But they were many, and he had been one in his fight against the moor; and he felt the keen air singing in his ears, and his heart beat high with gladness, as if, hard-pressed in battle, he had found friends to help him against a common enemy. Thrust, and swing of the spade, and thrust again; and last of all, another halt for breath.

"See yonder!" said the preacher.

Griff looked toward the east, and saw the moon rise fair and round into the haze of sky. She was above the highest hilltop now, and shadows crept like thieves from every darksome dene. Higher she rose, and higher, amid the stillness and the whiteness of the lonely heatherlands; and the snow grew blue as sapphires dimly seen; and the frost-flakes glittered softly from a thousand eyes; and every star in heaven grew dim with wonder and with awe.

Griff had known days and nights upon the moor—had known the fires of dawn and the low after-peace of gloaming—had seen spring glamour and riot of the purple summer—yet never had he looked upon a scene so witching and so full of dread, impenetrable awe as this. Waste after waste it stretched, white upon endless white, with that eerie, overspreading blue which the clear moon had lent. Out yonder, where the ridges billowed to the frosty sky, was Dead Man's Land, where good flesh lay beneath the bog, where Barguest, the Dog soft-footed as the snow itself, moved silently among the barren and the dead; out yonder was the

home of tragedies unknown, of murders done in stillness and in dark, of fierce, irreparable passions. The phantoms of these things stalked grey and dread about the land. And now the farm-dogs, wakened by the moon, began to howl from each lone steading, and their voice was Barguest's voice; and over all there was the frosty moon, calm as the fate that overrules man's littleness, watching the band of workers as they mopped the sweat from off their brows.

"By the Heart," said one, "I was always fond of a dog myself, but yond fools are howling fair like Barguest."

A shiver passed from one to another of these men who had not feared to make a road from Ling Crag out to Trawdon through a six-foot bed of snow.

"Barguest was ever one to scent a corpse," said another fearfully. "You may call them farm-dogs, lads; but I heard the Brown Dog once, and I know his note too well."

"Come, 'tis work, lads. Barguest is dead these fifty years," said Gabriel Hirst, the preacher. Yet his voice was rough, with a tremor in it, as if in him, too, the leaven of Grace had failed to oust old superstition.

And so they fell to work again, spadeful by spadeful, foot by foot, yard by hard-won yard. The wind, what little there was of it, blew east, and they heard the bells of Marshcotes church chime eight. They heard, but did not heed; and still the silent man, who had once been a Lomax of the Manor, worked harder than any pair of them.

So small the fruit was of their toil. Ahead, the snow stretched limitless, as at the first; behind, the track seemed short beyond belief. It was as if a palsied man walked feebly on his crutches and marvelled that the way showed long which once he had walked in the full glow of lusty youth.

"It's intake, this," thought Griff, as he swung his spade.

They had gained the rise that is topped by the old chapel, when Trash began to whine; and at the note the men ceased working, one and all.

"Dogs are always queer when they scent a burying," muttered one. "What is it, lad? Dost hear Barguest wend by on pattering feet?"

Trash gave no answer, but ran to the drift that lay, higher by two feet or more than any they had yet encountered, on the right hand of the road; and he whined no longer, but barked as a healthy dog of lightsome heart will do when sheep are to be driven.

"There are ewes in there," said Griff, who had learned the speech of dumb things better, during these last years, than he had learned the human tongue.

"We've enough to do, and to spare," grumbled Ephraim; "the ewes must bide, for Christian burial is a likelier work to set one's mind upon."

"There you are wrong, Ephraim," Griff answered quietly. "I have lived and learned a little, and I know that one life is as good as another—"

"Nay," said the preacher, "for some have souls to lose or save."

"Souls? We've all souls, Gabriel," said Griff impatiently. "Dogs have souls—bigger than most men's I've known—and bodies stand for souls, so long as breath is quick in them. Bear a hand here, lads! We'll not let honest sheep lose life for want of a few spade-thrusts."

Weary as they were, long as the task was that lay before them, it was not in the nature of Ling Crag folk to let sheep or cattle die for want of help. They might grumble, as now, but they went forward with the work of rescue. Soon they had dug a great rent out of the snow-bank, and the moonlight showed a fleece, a drooping tail, a patient head that bleated joyously at sight of these late rescuers. Another ewe was presently discovered, and behind her fifteen others, pressed close together for warmth's sake. The snow

at the far side of the shelter was yellow-brown with the warm grease from their wool. Trash was happy now. He understood the reason of this strange, slow progress through the snow, now that there were sheep to be driven; and he took charge of the rescued flock with a gravity all his own.

"Why, they're Timothy Earnshaw's sheep," said Ephraim, as the moon shone on the blood-red marking-letters. "By the Heart, they've strayed a tidy piece! For his farm-bigging lies a good three miles from here."

"Watch them, Trash," said Griff to his dog, as he took his spade again and went forward with the work.

On and on they toiled, till at the last one cast his spade down, then another, and the preacher cried that they had done a full day's work.

"We'll start with the dawn, lads," he said. "To-morrow should see us two miles farther on the road."

Griff was looking at the moon, crisp and bright, at the unclouded sky; he was tasting the curious, clean fragrance of the air; and none knew better than he these weather signs.

"The frost will strengthen and will hold," he said. "There will be no call to dig to-morrow, for the snow will be hard as ice."

"I doubt it," grumbled Ephraim. "Ling Crag Moor was never one to save folk trouble. She'll thaw before morn, will the jade, for fear she'll do us a good turn."

"Bide and see, then. I'll be here at dawn, Gabriel, frost or thaw," said Griff, whistling to his dog.

Trash looked at him, then at the sheep, and there was question in his eyes.

"What shall I do with them, he wants to know?" Griff laughed.

"Oh, I'll take them to my own farm-bigging," said Ephraim. "They haven't spirit to wag their tails, and we'll need no dog from here to Ling Crag."

"Then good-night, friends, for it's time I crossed the

moor," cried Griff. "And, by that token, I should have been home hours agone, for my cows have not been milked."

He had named them "friends," and the word haunted him as he walked by slippery ridge and treacherous hollow, with the full moon staring blindly at the blinding snow. It was years since he had spoken that word "friends," years since he had felt, as now, the ache for comradeship, the sense of his kinship with the world.

New forces were at work on him undoubtedly—new forces that were yet as old as his own earlier years. He had put his joy in living behind him, he had put all fellowship behind him; yet now, with the suddenness of waters too long held in prison, the old passions overwhelmed him. He yearned for comradeship; he thought, with quickened pulse and fancy, of those scenes on the snowbound way, where men worked to find roadway for a corpse. What pictures had he seen to-day! First, the red sun lying on the heath and lighting up the grim faces of the men who plied their spades; then the women and the children, standing on the stark, cold road, with starshine and the light of gloaming on their faces; last, the full moon, the wide, unconquerable heath, the backs bent double to the spade-thrust.

"Trash, old lad, there are few such days as this," he said to his dog, as they neared the black pile of Wynyates Kirk.

Trash pressed against his knee by way of answer, and his touch, to Griff's excited fancy, was human in its warmth. He looked at the Kirk Stone, and laughed softly. Once, when he was a raw lad, he had come here with a lass, and she had crept through the hole that pierced the rock at half a tall man's height. This was the test of wedlock, and all who could force a passage would be married within the twelvemonth; and so the rock was named a "Kirk," because it could give the certainty of marriage. Well, the lass who had come hither with him had crept through, and yet she

had not married him; only—and he laughed again as he recalled it—he had kissed her more than once on the road from Wynyates Kirk to Marshcotes. He had been by way of kissing many lasses in those days; and now, as he thought of it, it struck him as a foolish pastime.

He had halted a moment at the rock, humouring his taste for reverie. What was this Kirk, he wondered; how had it come to be a shrine to all the countryside? From the far-off fathers its great repute had come—the fathers whose blood was in his veins, whose superstitions stole in unawares by night and found him weak to harbour them. Toil as he would, shut out the past as best he might, the old beliefs were his—Barguest and the Kirk Stone, the Sorrowful Woman and the Man in Heather Brown, and he who rode by night, a ghost on a ghostly thoroughbred, with ghostly fox and ghostly hounds in front. He could not kill these things; he could but overlay them for a while, until they rose in pristine vigour and conquered him afresh.

Trash, for his part, was busy with the present. He had crept to the foot of the Kirk Stone, and his nose was in the air, and he was whimpering in a key that told of great disquiet. Griff, awakening at last from his dream of bygone days, was puzzled by the dog; it was no case of sheep, this, as on the road to Wyecollar; some alien scent was in the dog's nostrils, and he was fretful and insistent.

Griff came close up to the black pile, and the moon shone straight upon the narrowish hole. He saw a sodden pair of boots, a woman's skirt, and, while he halted in sheer bewilderment, the dog whined piteously.

For a moment Griff stood there, and over him there came that same overmastering sense of destiny which twice had made his pulses beat—once two nights ago, as he stood in the snowy starshine, and again this morning, when he walked the sun-tipped uplands with Gabriel Hirst. It was a moment such as we all have now and

then, when finer issues of our fate are shown us, when we know that weal or woe, alternate strands, are being woven into the motley garment of our lives.

Slowly he came to himself, and thrust his hands into the opening of the rock, until they grasped a woman's slender waist; and then, with a patience past belief, he drew and drew the sodden figure toward him. It seemed to him that he dared not hurt her; and yet he doubted if she lived. At last she was in his arms, and he had laid her on the moonlit snow; and when he looked at her upturned face he saw that it lay fair as a summer flower beneath her russet hair—yet pale, so pale! And then, with a low cry, he saw, too, that a child lay at her breast. The baby angered him, he knew not why; and yet the anger vanished as he stooped, and felt its body, and knew that it was dead. With the woman it was otherwise, for her heart beat faintly to his touch and her body quivered twice, as if she strove to break through the prison-house of death.

For a while Griff stood and looked upon the living and the dead, then picked up the woman—a burden frail enough—with the baby lying cold and still against her breast. As he had foretold, the frost was strengthening; but its power on the snow was slight as yet, and the journey over the white waste of moor, difficult before, was now a hardship and a danger. The cold blue moon looked down upon the black figures that disturbed the loneliness of heath and sky—looked down upon the slow-moving figure of the man, foredone with toil already and staggering under his light burden—looked down upon the trembling dog that slunk behind his master's heels. Only the man's heavy breathing disturbed the silence—that, and Trash's constant whine; for dogs are quick on the scent of tragedy, and Trash, who knew that one at least of the rescued folk was dead, knew also that in the near future lay tears and bitter heartache.

CHAPTER V

THE BURDEN OF THE RESCUER

PAST bearded riggs they went, the man and the dog, and down by the banks of sullen marshes, and by the edge of treacherous clefts where the snow lay level with the brim and hid their pitfalls. On and on they stumbled, until at last they reached the hut, which seemed no more than a bigger snowdrift on the heath.

Griff kicked the hut door open and laid his burden—a silent woman clasping a silent child—upon the rude bed in the corner.

Then he sought flint and steel, and coaxed the fire to burn. And Trash at least grew happier; he was between remembered walls again, with the remembered hearth ablaze in front of him, and he gave an odd whimper of content as he lay and watched the master go about his tasks.

There was abundance of milk, left over from the hasty breakfast which Hirst and he had shared that morning, and Griff filled a pan and set it on the peats. This done, he went to the bedside and took the babe and laid it softly on the ground; and then he fell to chafing the woman's hands and feet—she stirred and moaned, as if in pain, when he drew off her sodden boots—and tried from time to time to force a spoonful of spirit between her white, clenched teeth.

The moments passed, and still he laboured to bring back life to this frozen outcast. Where was his philosophy? He had held life cheap—a thing that men

could lay down, when their time came, as they would a burden, and be glad. Yet now his strength and his will went out to save this one life, snatched from his enemy the moor. Perhaps it was another phase of his life's work—the itch to fight the heath and conquer it. Perhaps it was the sense—it held him still—that fate had set a landmark in his path this night. At any rate, he laboured at his healing work until the sweat stood beaded on his forehead.

He was rewarded by and by. Just when his hopes were lowest, the woman turned and moved her arms and opened her grey eyes. Scarce knowing why he did it, he ripped his coat off and covered the dead body of the child that lay upon the floor.

"So cold, so cold it is!" the woman murmured. "The boy will surely die. Ah, God, and I had only him!"

Still Griff chafed her hands and feet, and when at last she rose upon the bed, and looked about her with wide, startled eyes, he crossed to the hearth and lifted the pan of milk and poured a cupful out with steady hand.

"Drink this," he said.

She took it like a child and sipped it—painfully at first, and afterwards in eager gulps. When it was done she held the mug out with a silent gesture; he refilled it, and again she drank it greedily.

"It was like the grave!" she murmured. "Surely it was the grave—and death was white, white—as white as they say the angels are. Yet now there is the fire-light, and the warmth—"

She stopped, and let her great, grave eyes rest questioningly on his; yet even as they asked the question the lids drooped heavily. She sighed, as if in great content, and fell into a slumber that was to last till dawn.

Griff watched her for a while, and knew not what his thoughts were. The firelight lay upon her face, with its shroud of russet hair, its colourless, clear beauty—upon her figure, slim and graceful under all her snow-stained wearing-gear—upon the delicate, proud hands

and shapely feet. In all his life he had seen no woman half as fair as this; and yet twelve hours ago he would have told himself that he no longer understood what made for beauty in a woman.

With a start he came to himself and heaped fresh peats and wood upon the hearth. And then he lifted the quiet figure from the bed—lifted it with curious gentleness—and pulled the blankets down, and laid her back again—and covered her. The hut was warm, for the depth of snow on roof and walls was in itself as snug as a coat of woollen stuff—yet he must leave no chance of heat untried.

She did not wake, nor even murmur in her sleep, as he laid her back and drew the blankets to her chin; and, as he sat beside the bed and watched the life come back, breath by quiet breath, to her wan face, he knew that once again he had snatched victory from the moor.

Trash, meanwhile, was crouching in a corner of the hut, sleeping with uneasy eyes, and whining now and then in helpless fashion. He knew what lay yonder under the master's coat, and the fear of dead things bristled all his shaggy hide. Life he could understand; but death was a cold mystery, coming from lands where no sheep were, nor conies, nor rats by the waterside; and for this cause the warm hut was cold to Trash, whose ghostly senses were sharper than a man's could ever be.

And still Griff sat beside his sleeping guest and wondered what were best to be done when she awoke. Her first question would be for the child, and God knew if she would ever rally after seeing its dead body. What should he do?

On the sudden it grew clear to him what he must do; and yet he shrank from doing it. He rose from the bedside, plucked his coat from off the body, and sat before the hearth, the child upon his knees. It seemed that he could come to a more firm decision thus.

"Yes, I must do it," he said at last. "Better to save her half the grief, no matter what her own wish would be."

He did not rise just yet, however; for on the sudden these last years of toil were swept away, and he was living once again in the days whose memory he had striven to bury out of sight. Always a man to see as clearly with the mind as with the eye, his loneliness had fostered visions, and one by one the old scenes stood out before him, clear-cut and palpable as the heath which glistened, league on league, beneath the frosty moon.

The little dead child on his knees—long, long ago had he not sat just so, in his widowed house, and nursed his own dead boy, and let the cry for vengeance ring in his ears, hour after weary hour? He had gone forth to seek his enemy, and had found him already past the offices of hate. Clear to the last detail was that scene upon the ghostly Ludworth road. Then, as now, there had been thick snow on heath and highway; and he had found his enemy, an empty liquor bottle at his right hand, and on his face the look of those who die the snow-death.

How little his hatred seemed to-night! He had lived so long with bigger forces that he no longer felt the wish to hate. Yet once he had walked abroad, with a mist of blood before his eyes and in his heart an eager wish to slay.

Griff was gazing into the peats, and the scenes changed one by one. His wife's face came before him—eager, trustful. His mother's face, too, looked out on him—the loyal comrade-mother who had never grudged him aught save misery. Little Greta of the Mill came, too, and he recalled their meeting by the streamside on a summer's morning, and Gabriel Hirst's mad jealousy. It was as if the waters closed about him, and in the last passionless surrender to his fate he saw his life pass day by day before him—saw it, not in vague fashion, but

clearly, as if the pictures looked at him from out the red-eyed peats.

"So cold, so cold—and the boy can never live through it," came an uneasy whisper from the bed.

Griff got to his feet, shifted the child's body to his left arm, and caught up a spade that stood beside the door. The past was done with, and he had work to finish before the dawn.

Trash whined and pressed against his legs as he opened the door. "Get back, lad. We've no need of thee," Griff whispered.

But the dog, slavishly obedient at most times, would pay no heed to-night. He feared to stay alone amongst the ghosts; he longed to see if there were any help in action, since inactivity had bred such terrors in his mind. And so he slipped through the half-open door and whined excuses, and Griff had not the heart to send him back.

Man and dog went silently across the crisping snow, until they gained the moor that lay, like a watchful enemy, above the fenced plot of intake. Weary as he was with the day's labour, empty of food and drink, moreover, Griff did not know it; with a step that was forceful yet, he gained a long, high-standing ridge, where the snow was scarce six inches deep, and here he halted and laid down the body of the child.

Under the snow the peat was soft, and almost warm, despite the sharpening frost; soon he had dug the grave, and laid the child in it, and covered it with mother-peat again. And then he rested, and looked at the fast-setting moon, at the stars which were brightening one by one, now that the greater light was near farewell.

What a lonely, overwhelming waste it seemed—this waste which was to be henceforth the dead child's home. Would the mother, sleeping yonder, not rail at him for the night's work? Something that was half remorse stole over him, as he watched the moon's rim touch the distant snows; and he called aloud to the moor that was his friend and enemy.

"Be good to the little lad," he said. "He's frail, poor bairn, and you are strong."

There was no answer audible to fleshly ears, but in Griff's heart there spoke a voice, clear as the pictures he had lately seen within the peats. And he knew that he had done well.

Something, it may be, spoke to the dog's heart, too; for he lifted up his voice amid the waste, and barked for gladness, and frisked about his master as if it were a holiday.

The moon was setting fast; already the white edge of the heath had clipped a ragged piece from out her rounded blue; already the stars that held the eastern strip of sky were shining crisp and bright; and the silence of the snow-wrapped lands was dread as the hour might be that comes before the Judgment Day.

Griff laid his shovel on the new-made grave to mark its place, then went along the rigg, and over the stone fence, and down into the fragrant warmth of peats that filled the hut. The woman was sleeping still, just as he had left her, and Griff piled new fuel on the fire. Tired as he was—he began to feel it now—he was resolute to take no sleep to-night. She might need his services at any moment, and if once he fell asleep it would need, he knew, no little force to rouse him.

He took his pipe out and filled it slowly; and Trash crept up to him, and laid one forepaw on his knee, and talked as best he could. For Trash, now that his master's coat was on his back—covering live, wholesome flesh again—now that the dread of the unknowable was past—Trash hungered for his supper; and the pipe, he knew, came after, not before a meal; and he was sorely troubled.

"What, lad?" Griff whispered. "Thou'lt learn to talk one day, but what's thy meaning now?"

Trash, with a gesture admitting no second meaning, went to his empty plate and licked it with painstaking

care. So Griff, smiling even in the midst of his own heaviness, set the porridge-pan upon the fire.

"I'd clean forgotten, Trash," he said, "and, now you bring it back to mind, I'm far gone myself for want of supper."

From the chest that served as cupboard and as larder he took a loaf and a pat of the sweet butter which Hester churned each week for him, and cut himself and Trash a slice apiece. Trash always had butter to his bread; for he was Griff's comrade, one to be treated upon equal terms. Then they waited till the porridge was ready,—Trash sitting quietly on his haunches, with only one cocked ear to witness to his eagerness,—and the dog grew very wistful when he saw that the master and he were to have only half their usual ration to-night.

"She'll want it by and by, old lad," said Griff, nodding at the quiet figure on the bed.

Trash said no more, but ate his porridge, as did Griff, with an appetite beyond denial. And only then did Lomax remember that his labours were not over for the night. The unwonted excitement of the day, the eagerness to work at the snow-clearing as long as any man would toil beside him, had made him later in the home-coming than he had meant to be; the finding of the woman had filled his mind with a new interest that dwarfed all others; and now, far on past midnight, he remembered that his cows had not yet been milked.

In a moment he was up and out of the hut door—after a glance of inquiry at the sleeping woman—and had crossed to the mistal, Trash following like a shadow And indeed the cattle were in evil plight; and first one, and then another, groaned in sheer distress as Griff went in. Yet it was good, for all that, to see the look in their eyes as they turned their sleek heads towards him; they seemed so womanish, these great brown eyes of the kine, which showed suffering, and pleading, and yet a wondrous trust in the master who had left them for so long untended—in the master who was coming now to

right their troubles. Tired as he was, Griff milked deftly, quickly; for not Joshua Royd himself, up yonder at Windy Farm, had a softer heart toward cattle than had the master of Lostwithens.

It was done at last, and the milk was carried to the dairy; and then Griff went into the hut again, lit his pipe, and sat and kept his weariness at bay. Now and then he glanced toward the bed, and saw the even rise and fall of healthy breathing, and wondered—mazed as he was with toil and the fret of unaccustomed passions—if this guest of his were some White Lady, born of the boglands and the marsh to come between strong men and the work that strong men needed. The countryside was full of such old legends; his mother had passed them down to him, along with faith in Barguest and the Riding Squire of Wyecollar, and only a little while ago he had been warned against the Snow Women by Hester Royd herself. Had he fallen a victim to one such ghost, he wondered?

Yet even as his tired brain went to and fro among old superstitions, his head fell down upon his breast; and soon he and Trash and the quiet woman on the bed were sleeping the deep sleep of weariness. Wanderers, all three of them, they had found an hour or two of peace amid their exile; yet even now the dog—whose history was as secret and as full of mystery as Griff's—would start from time to time, and lift his head, and whine in memory of some unforgotten trouble.

CHAPTER VI

NED O' BRACKEN CLOUGH

GRIFF woke with a sense of sunlight in his eyes, and rose and shook himself. The peats were long since dead, but the morning sun was shining crisply through the window of the hut. Slowly the happenings of the night gone by came back to him, and he turned to the figure on the bed. Her eyes were open now—deep eyes and clear, of that faithful hazel tint so dear to upland folk—and they were resting on his face.

"You are awake before me!" he cried. "And I was sure that I could hold my eyes open until you needed me."

Her voice came low and weak, but with a note of strength in it. "I wakened with the dawn," she said, "and ever since I've watched you as you slept. It was so good to lie here, and to know that the white, white lands were quite shut out."

"You'll need a draught of milk," said Griff, setting it on the fire as if he had ministered to sick folk each day of the past solitary years. Trash and he were wont to drink their milk unwarmed, but this frail wanderer had had enough of cold and to spare, and must be cosseted.

She watched him awhile as he cut thin slices of bread and buttered them; and then she spoke again, still in the same dreamy voice.

"And my boy?" she said. "I cannot tell how I came here—all is blank to me, as if white snow lay over mind as well as body—and I was fearful when I woke and found him not beside me. But then I looked at you,

and you were strong and brave, and you had rescued us; and I knew the child was safe."

Griff sliced at the bread so savagely that the knife slipped aside; he had looked for tears and anguish, but not for this quiet trust in his own power to save. How should he answer her?

"See, you have cut your finger," she went on. "It is dripping on to the brown loaf."

He sucked the wound, and stooped to the stack of fuel that lay beside the hearth, and dusted it with fine peat-mould. The action, like his superstitions, came from the bygone fathers, who had staunched bloodier wounds than this with the same healing dust.

"It is nothing," he said, in a hard voice. "Listen; I have more to tell you of last night."

She saw the trouble in his face, and raised herself upon the bed. "Of the child?" she asked. "Nay, he is well—he must be well. I have lain here watching you, and I told myself that you would never let a child be killed by snow, or man, or devil."

The woman's passion, coming from so delicate a body, was startling to the man. Her trust in him—whence came it? He remembered his rough life, his rough, neglected hands—matters he had not thought of for a twelvemonth and a day. Surely a softly nurtured woman, such as she, should shrink from him. And he had no comfort, no single word of comfort, to give to her!

He went on cutting needless slices of the bread and buttering them. "The child was past help when first I found you," he said at last.

"He is dead?" she whispered.

"I buried him before the dawn came up," he answered, and turned to pour the milk into a cup.

For a long moment she was silent, and then the merciful, warm tears began to flow; and Griff, forgetting milk and bread and all, went out into the silent snow and left her to her sorrow.

Trash, for his part, was braver. He had feared the dead thing lying under his master's coat, but he had no fear of living sorrow, and he knew, in his queer dog's way, that there was one between these rough stone walls who needed comforting. Much as he loved to frolic in the open, he did not follow Griff, but went and sat beside the bed, his eyes upon the woman.

And by and by her sobs grew quieter and more quiet, and Trash climbed up on to the bed, and laid a cold nose on her cheek, and talked in his own tongue—soft words and low, of comfort and of hope.

Nothing but that could have eased the woman's load. The dumbness of the brute seemed to make his sympathy more real; she put one slender arm about his neck, and drew him to her, and let the tears rain down upon his hairy face.

"He was my all—my all," she wept.

She was weak of body still, and presently, when the tears had left her helpless, she fell asleep from utter weariness; and Trash nestled to her breast, knowing his work well done, and snored with infinite content; and Lomax, when he entered with miserable forebodings of the scene to come, found dog and guest unmindful of their troubles.

For a while he stood, as he had stood last night, and watched the dusky lashes lying on pale cheeks—lashes that seemed, by their darkness, to make the russet hair more splendid and more bright. Not a thought of her womanhood was in his mind; he had buried all that on the lang-syne day when earth was thrown upon the coffin of his wife; he only saw her as the victim of the moor his enemy, and as a picture such as any man might care to look upon.

"Poor child," he muttered, "she is young to have suffered so much and to lose so much. And see how Trash will muddy her soft cheek!"

He was roused by a knock upon the door—a quick, impatient knock. He opened, and saw Hester Royd

upon the frosted path. She had a basket on her arm, and her face was full of that indefinable, blunt coquetry which she practised, as by instinct, on man or lad or grazing heifer that crossed her path.

"Oh, 'tis you, Hester," said Griff. "I had forgotten that the week's bread was due."

"You had forgotten the bread-carrier, then," said she, with a toss of the head. "But then you never had a man's eyes in your head when lasses waited on your doorstone."

He laughed, a little sadly. "Eyes grow dim with age, lass," said he, "and may be it is better so."

"Well, take it further then, and say it's better to be under sod. When a man forgets what womankind can give him, he's nearer six-by-three than I should care to be."

She stepped indoors, but Griff laid a hand upon her shoulder. "See you, Hester," he whispered. "I found a woman yesternight at Wynyates Kirk. She was snow-bound, and I brought her here, and she's asleep. We must not waken her."

Hester stood still within the doorway and looked at him. He could not understand her smile, nor the queer light in her eyes. Then, without a word of any sort, she went indoors, and looked upon the sleeping woman, upon the dog who snored so happily.

"She's over bonnie," was all she said, when at last she turned to Griff.

"Bonnie? What is bonnieness?" he muttered. "She is sleeping herself back to life—and the moor all but snatched her from me."

"Ay, she's intake, too. It's all you think about," said Hester Royd. She paused, then raised her eyes to his with a sudden question in them. "Were you ever a man, Mr. Lomax?" she asked.

He turned from the sleeping woman on the bed, and glanced at Hester and laughed softly. "Yes, once," he said. "And now, thank God, I'm only a bit of Ling Crag Moor."

"She'll alter that," said Hester, drawing in her lips. "If you've once had a heart, it's sure to find you out again. And to think of me, with my big hands and feet, set side by side with her," she added in a rueful undertone.

Griff did not pursue the topic; Hester had said over much and over little to him, but his mind was too far away to notice this. He recalled the stress and storm of yesterday, that had closed with the strange meeting at Wynyates Kirk; he remembered that he had promised to meet Gabriel Hirst and all his Ling Crag friends at dawn to-day.

"Hester," he said suddenly, "could you stay and tend this stranger? There's work for me on the Ling Crag road, and I've given my promise."

"And what takes you to the Ling Crag road?" asked Hester wonderingly. It was not like Griff, she knew, to go so far in search of company.

"A burying. Ephraim Shackleton's wife lies dead, and she asked for a grave in Trawdon churchyard."

Hester's eyes grew wider still. "Oh, and you're digging through six foot of snow to give a dead woman lodging room? It's like you, in a way; but, if you'd turn your eyes on living folk, Mr. Lomax, instead of dead, you'd get more for your trouble."

Griff smiled, as if this lusty, full-grown lass were a child in pinafores. "A promise is a promise, whether it's made to dead or living.—You'll tend her well, Hester?" he went on, with a glance at the bed, from which Trash was rising at the moment to greet his master.

"Oh, ay, I'll tend her. But there'll no good come of it. She's gentle-born and bonnie, and what has she to do with Ling Crag Moor?"

"Well, Ling Crag Moor has nearly had too much to do with her. There's milk in the pan yonder," he added, as an afterthought. "Give it to her when she wakes."

"Men shouldn't set up for housekeepers," she said

"The milk has boiled away, and if it weren't for Providence—and me—there'd be a hole in the bottom of the pan."

She held the pan out, coated thick on the bottom with a dried scum of milk; but the crime sat lightly on him.

"Well, there's plenty yonder in the bowl," he said. "Set it to boil, and remember that she has had nothing to eat since God knows when."

He whistled softly to his dog, and was for setting off, but Hester kept him a moment longer.

"What will Gabriel Hirst find to say?" she asked, standing buxom in the doorway and shading the sunlight from her eyes with two brown hands. "I doubt he'll search the Book, and talk of the wenches that no modest lass should read about. And when he sees her face he'll scare you well-nigh to death with Brimstone and the Pit."

He only laughed for answer, and strode—a big man under a big, frosty sky—across the frozen moor. Women were remote as stars to him in these days, and he had as little sense of sex as had the ling and marl and peat in which he worked.

His prophecy of frost held good, and even now the snow was hard beneath his boots. He need no longer skirt the valleys, but walked in a straight line, over ten-foot drifts and snow-filled clefts, as if the snow were nature's highroad, sure and stable. It seemed impossible that by and by the wind would veer to the south, and the frost loose its grasp, and all this solid footing change to fickle, moving water.

Only once did he turn from his straight course, and that was when he came to the Shifting Bog that lay this side of Conie Crag Ravine. The Shifting Bog had never in the memory of the moor-folk been frozen over; its ooze lay liquid to the sunlight, and turned, as if in sleep, and waited for chance wayfarers.

Griff stayed to look at it. "Ay," he muttered, "you are hungry and you wait; but only yesternight I

snatched a victim from a death as cold as yours. Wait and shiver, old bog, and may God keep all travellers on the safe side of your banks."

Trash too mistrusted the dark, sullen place; more than once he had looked on while men strove to rescue cattle from the bog, and he remembered, haply, the look on the faces of the victims. The next moment, though, he had forgotten, as a hare leaped out across the snow and doubled down a rigg. Like a flash the dog was after him, and presently returned with the quarry in his jaws.

"Thou'rt clumsy to look at, lad," laughed Griff, as he gathered the hind legs of the hare into one hand, "but thy feet are faster than any dog's about the moorside."

He was glad of the spoil, for he told himself, as he swung across the pasture-fields and into the Ling Crag highroad, that he could make a savoury dish for the poor child who lay behind there in the hut. It was a new note in his life, this thought for the little details of another's welfare; and at his heart there was a warm glow, as of happiness, such as he had felt yesterday while helping to make a roadway through the snow.

There were no workers here this morning; the road toward Ling Crag lay just as they had left it, while on the Trawdon side, as he had prophesied, the snow was hard as ice beneath the feet. The labour these good folk had promised cheerfully was needless now, and many an hour of thankless toil was saved.

Griff turned home again, anxious to hear how it was faring with his guest; then, remembering that she was in good hands, he went down the winding steep which led him to Ling Crag. He had shared the labour yesterday, and he would learn for what day the funeral was fixed, so that he might pay a last tribute to Ephraim's wife.

The landlord of the Eagle Tavern was at his door when Griff went by, and he called a cheery greeting.

"It's like old times, Mr. Lomax, sir, to see you with a

dog at your heels and a fat hare swinging in your hand."

"And so it is, William," said Griff, stopping for a moment to indulge his new-found sense of fellowship. "It brings back to mind some nights we've had together."

The landlord scratched his stubbly chin, and a light of frolic came into his old eyes. "I reckon it does," he laughed. "It's well to walk sober-like, sir, but I'd be fain to see you at your old, wild games. There was that night—you'll call it back to mind?—when we fought Squire Daneholme and his keepers. Eh, but it was a rare frolic! And there wasn't a straight nose among us when we'd done—and only an odd one here and there that could see through his two eyes."

"Lord, they were good days, William!" cried Griff, with a sudden, boyish glee. "But a man must come to soberness some day."

He swung the hare quietly to and fro, and watched it for a while. He was thinking of the years that lay between then and now, and of the insight he had gained yesterday as to the new light in which his neighbours looked at him. And somehow he wished to stand on a right footing with them; he did not choose that they should think him "fairy-kist."

"The land up yonder at Lostwithens is thriving, William," he said, following his unspoken thoughts. "It is thriving, and I made it. There's no madness in good work of that sort, and so you may tell these wise folk of Ling Crag."

"Well, sir, you're looking grand—bigger in the beam, and nuttier of skin—and I reckon work is physic to you. Now, say ye'll step inside and take a taste of rum for old sake's sake."

Griff humoured him. He felt strangely buoyant, strangely like a lad let loose to go a-holidaying. For five years he had never crossed a tavern floor; yet, when he found himself within, with a pewter mug before him and a clean clay in his hand, it seemed but yesterday

that he had sat in this same parlour of the Eagle. It had been, indeed, a favourite haunt of his, as of his father's before him, when the devil-may-cares of the parish assembled to discuss the next cock-fight or some projected poaching raid. For Marshcotes Manor touched fingers with Squire Daneholme's land, which was richer in respect of game of all kind, and the gentry of the moor had been no less slow than the simpler folk to enjoy a midnight venture now and then; the thing was in the blood, a passion that united hind and farmer and gentle-born in one bond of fellowship.

"God, how it all comes back to a man!" murmured Griff. "I should like to be out with net and twine to-night, William."

The host's face began to glow and twinkle in a way familiar to Griff.

"Lord bless you, sir," he chuckled, "we're going out this very night, as it chances. You can have your wish as soon as ask for it."

Griff pulled reflectively at his clay. He was half minded, since work was out of question, to have his fling again this once. For could he not recall the exquisite, free joy in living that holds a man when he waits in his neighbour's wood, a pheasant in one hand, a blackthorn stick in the other, and hears the keepers treading softly up behind? Ay, he could smell the snow-crisp air, and hear the little noises which haunt a wood by night, and feel the breeze go trickling past his face.

"You'll come, sir? 'Twill be like life again to have you with us," said William, his face half within, half without the ample body of his mug.

On the sudden Griff remembered the charge which Ling Crag Moor had lately laid on him. The woman he had rescued was weak yet, and not fit to be left alone; he must forego his whim.

"Not to-night, William," he said. "I have other work."

"What, work at midnight! You must be fearful busy,

sir," put in the landlord, open-mouthed. "Well, after all, it mightn't be so merry as you'd look for it to be. Squire Daneholme is not the man he was a few years back; he never comes to fight us now himself, and his keepers have grown slack."

There was genuine regret in William's voice. He poached for frolic, and the stronger force he had against him, the better he enjoyed the prospect of hard knocks.

"What is amiss with him, then?" asked Griff. "I have been out of the world, as you know, and news travels slowly to me, or never at all."

"Ah, you've not heard, then, of what happened to his niece? She was all he had, you'll recall, he being unwedded and having no children—at least none, so to say, that a man could own—and he was mighty set on her."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Well, three years back she took on with a wildish young squire from Lancashire. Her uncle said he'd see her dead sooner than wedded to the spark; but she had a will and a temper of her own, and she ran off with him and married him on the quiet. The old Squire never got over it; he's been a broken man ever since—and she's been a broken woman, if all I hear be true. She went to live just t'other side of Wyecollar, and my sister's husband's brother was in service with them; and that's how I come to know of the queer goings-on there were betwixt her husband and herself."

"I remember her," said Griff, lazily following the curl of his pipe-smoke. "I met her once when we were hunting, in the old days, out Saxilton way. I can see her yet—slim and straight in the saddle, with hair the colour of a leaf in autumn and a face as proud as Lucifer's. She and I were the only ones in at the death that day, I remember—the huntsman had fallen at the last fence—and I handed her the brush."

"Well, she's not in at the death nowadays—not in that way," said William drily. "Her husband killed himself a while since, but he lived long enough to break

her spirit, so they tell me. What, going, sir? It's a short stay, seeing that you've not been under my roof-tree for a good five years."

"I'll mend my manners, William," laughed Griff, as he tossed off the remainder of his measure. "You will find me coming for a bit of poaching before the winter's out."

"And glad to see you, sir! I often tell these lads that they'd know what frolic was if only Mister Lomax was among us once again. Bless me, what a look of your father you have, now you stand to your full height! There were few better men than your father, sir, and that's true gospel."

The landlord watched his guest swing out across the frozen road.

"A fine lad marred," he said reflectively. "Yet, is he marred? He can work, and he can stick to it, and that is something in a man. I wonder what set him wrong at the beginning of it all. It would be a lassie; oh, ay, 'twould be a lassie; take the crust off any pie, and you'll find a wench's face beneath."

Griff, however, was not thinking of the dark secret that had "set him wrong at the beginning of it all." He felt oddly free of the past years of trouble; he looked forward to seeing old faces on the village road, and nodded cheerily as now one and now another of his old acquaintances met him. He was learning, truth to tell, that subtle joy which only the strong man driven into the wilderness, the strong man who has not succumbed to terrors of the wilderness, can know. He found that old friends were friendly still, and that they showed a rough and hearty gladness in knowing that he was among them once again. And the sense of this was with him as he strode along the hard, cold highroad; he had come from a world of solitude and strife, and the kindliness he met was a touchstone, turning his heart to the simple gladness of a child's. Once, too, he thought of that niece of Squire Daneholme's of whom the landlord had spoken; and he wondered why the picture of her, as she

sat in the saddle and held her hand out for the fox's brush, should come so clearly back to him. It had been at the time an adventure in the careless life of a hard-riding youngster; he had ridden home with her, moreover, when they found themselves, ten miles from Saxilton, with the gloaming settling down and not one of her friends in view; and perhaps he had made a nine-days' heaven for himself, as lads will, after the ride was over and he had said farewell at the gate of Daneholme Priory. Was that excuse enough for the thought that he was giving now to a bygone episode, excuse for the clearness with which fancy painted for him the dainty face, the rich, disordered hair, the lithe young figure? He was puzzled, not knowing the slender link which, only yesterday, had bound the present and the past together.

By this time, however, he was half through Ling Crag village, and had found the house he sought—a grey, quiet house, whose garden, with its snow-weighted laburnum, holly, and silver birch, kept a prim front towards the street. It was here that Gabriel Hirst, the preacher, lived, in alternate gladness that he had so sweet a wife and anguish lest his love of her were a deadly sin by reason of its bigness.

Griff swung open the gate and went up the clean-swept path. When last he had passed in here there had been stocks and daisies, ladslove, and bits of hardy greenery on either side the trim-kept path; but now the path itself was snow-covered, and along the borders, where no broom had been, the drifts lay level with the window-sills. Only the preacher's wife, who had once been bonnie Greta Rotherson of the Mill, seemed spruce and summerlike as she had always been; a little plumper she showed, as she stood with the open door in her hand and welcomed Griff; but her face was a girl's face still, and the dimples played like little elves about her mouth and chin.

"Why, Mr. Lomax, you're a stranger," she cried, with obvious welcome. "And it's like you to choose such

a day when at last you remember old friends. You'll come indoors?"

"I will, if your passage-floor will be no worse for it. You were always doubtful of my feet, Mrs. Hirst, when I used to cross a wet bit of moor to see your father."

He followed her indoors, amazed that in a moment, so it seemed, he had returned to the old half-jesting friendship that had held between himself and Greta. And she, for her part, remembered that this big, wide-shouldered man, whose face she had scarcely recognised at a first glance, had once on a day befriended her, and befriended, too, the man she loved.

"I'll bring you cake and cheese," she said, when he had settled himself in the big chair by the parlour fire. "You will be hungry after such a walk."

She moved to the door, and by and by brought in a tray, and set it down beside his elbow, all with the graceful care for a man's comfort that had marked her in the days gone by.

"And will it ever thaw again?" she said, seating herself on a low footstool, her hands spread out before the blaze. "I am from the south, you will remember, and oh, the winter is so long up here!"

"Ay, it's long; and perhaps I like it less than I used to do, for nowadays it keeps me idler than I care to think of."

"You were not idle yesterday, at any rate, from what Gabriel tells me. He says you took two spade-swings for one of his—and he's not weak at any sort of work."

"Oh, it was just to keep my patience steady. Work is like food and drink to me in these days." He paused, then laughed, a quiet, merry laugh, as he sought the eyes of his companion. "Do you remember how you sat on a pine log once in Hazel Dene?" he said. "That was six years ago at least, and yet it seems but yesterday. You had been paddling in the beck, and I came up the waterside, and you sat with your feet under you, thinking I did not know."

A rosy flush crept over Greta's face. She too remembered—and remembered how cramped her feet were when at last she got rid of the intruder.

"Gabriel quarrelled with you on that day," she said shyly.

"For the first and the last time."

Suddenly her face grew pale. "Oh, what a dreadful night that was! He came to me at the Mill—do you remember?—father was from home—and told me how he had fought with you at the quarry-edge, and how he had thrown you over into the black pool below. And I went with him to your home, and you were safe and sound, thanks to the thorn tree growing from the quarry-face. And the joy of it turned me sick and shivering—the joy of knowing that there was no blood on Gabriel's hands."

Griff's eyes were sombre now. With ever-gaining force the dead years came back to him—the sunlight and the storm of them, and the last days of blackness that had severed him once and for all from fellowship with men.

"Was it ill or well that I did not die that night?" he said, more to himself than to Greta.

"Oh, shame on you to think it, or to say it—you who are strong, and full of work and the will to work."

"You are right," he said quietly. "I would not have lost these five years for all that life could give me."

There was a silence, broken by the opening of a door, by the stamping of feet on the passage-floor; and presently Gabriel came into the parlour, his face all red and tingling with the frost. At his heels crept Trash, who had failed to make an entry when his master did.

"Here's your dog, Griff," said the preacher, giving Lomax a big handshake. "I found the poor beast shivering on the doorstep, and wondered why you left him in the cold."

"It is not often that I forget you, eh, old lad?" Griff

muttered, stooping to caress the shaggy hide. "I think it was the sight of your wife, Gabriel, that took other thoughts away. She's just as bonnie and as sweet as when you thought all Marshcotes meant to snatch her from you."

"Nay, but there was always a pat of butter on your tongue," laughed Greta. "You've altered, and yet you are the same."

But Gabriel was looking at his wife, with a straightforward adoration that none could miss. "She is like a bit of sweetbriar, Griff, about the place," he said in his blunt, earnest way.

Yes, Griff knew what was meant by that "smell of sweetbriar about the place." Short as his own wedded life had been, he had tasted its sweetness to the full; and now, as he looked at the preacher and at Greta, a sudden, overwhelming sense of loss came to him.

"My own wife died, and I am envying you, old friend," he said. Then, with an effort, "I came to see you about the burying," he went on. "The snow is hard, and we can win to Trawdon with a sleigh."

"I have just come from Ephraim, and he does not want to bury his wife until the full week is over. I tell him it is no time to think of such matters; the Lord has sent us a hard road, and saved us grievous toil, and we should make the most of it. God cannot always keep His frosts waiting for men's desires, and the wind is shifting a point south of east already."

Griff could hardly hold back a smile. This was the Gabriel he remembered—Gabriel of the earnest outlook upon things, and of the no less earnest eye for such practical matters as the shifting of the wind.

"The frost will hold for many a day yet," he said; "and yet—it would be well to run no risk. Well, set me on my road, Gabriel, and we can stop at Ephraim's door, and try to turn him from his purpose."

"Ay, I will join you, though he is a hard man to turn at all times. And you'll come back, Griff, afterwards,

and have a bite and sup with us? It's long since we broke bread together."

"I cannot. There is work for me out yonder—the roan cow is ailing, and needs over-watching, and—"

He did not finish. Some recollection of what Hester Royd had said that morning of the beauty of his guest came back to him, and he could not speak of the stranger-woman with Greta there. Women had strange ways of looking at these matters; he would tell Gabriel afterwards, and he would understand, in a man's way, what the situation at Lostwithens was.

Together they went out, with Trash behind them, and crossed the village street, and knocked at Ephraim's door. Ephraim himself it was who opened to them, and he looked doubtfully at the minister, so soon returned after long argument.

"We've come to beg you to shorten the time of lying-out," said Griff. "Man, have you learned so little of the moor that you can trust her to be in one mind for long?"

Ephraim squared his shoulders and planted his feet apart, with stolid obstinacy. "I don't trust the moor," he said; "but I'd think shame to bury her," pointing backward and upward with his thumb, "before the week is out. Nay, poor lass, it's little more we'll see one of t'other in this world, and it's a cold lodging-place she'll find at Trawdon yonder."

"Yet if it thaws, say, the day before the burying, we can never dig a way to Trawdon in time."

Ephraim's attitude grew less stiff; he was thinking deeply. Moreover, Griff had earned a reputation—that of being "fairy-kist"—which gave a superstitious weight to all he said, even in the judgment of such rough, weather-beaten men as Ephraim Shackleton.

"There's sense in that," muttered the widower. "Ay, there's sense in that. And a body wouldn't keep, I reckon, once the cold lessened. And it would be a vexing thing for the lass, that it would, to be hurried

into the nighest graveyard for want of a bit of forethought."

"Let the burying be to-morrow," urged Griff.

"I'm willing," said Ephraim, after a pause. "And now you'll come upstairs and have a look at her? She's bonnier than most to look at."

From his ladhood's days Griff had shrunk from this kind of scene; yet refusal would have been a cause of heart-soreness to one whose heart was sore enough already, and he followed Ephraim up the narrow stair. Trash, eager at most times to go in and out wherever his master went, showed no wish to follow, but sat on the doorstep with miserable, dim eyes and trembling body.

The woman lay upon the bed, all wrapped in snowy linen, with peace upon the closed eyes and the unfurrowed face. The dead was satisfied: and her husband too had his share of content, for he knew she looked her best—looked, indeed, as tranquil and as secure in happiness as when she had put her hand in Ephraim's and pledged herself to be his wife.

Then quietly they went down the stair again, and Ephraim pointed to the dog, still shivering on the doorstep.

"They know, I reckon," he said quietly. "See how his coat is all of a shiver, as if a colder wind than east or north was blowing through him. Well, good-day to you, and I thank you for your kindliness."

"You did not meet us on the road at dawn," said Gabriel, as he started to see Griff on his way. "I fancied you'd be over full of sleep after the work you'd done."

"It was not that. I found a woman and a dead child on Ling Crag Moor; she all but died afterwards, and I stayed to tend her until Hester Royd came down this morning with the bread."

Gabriel halted in surprise. "And she is there—in that rude hut of yours?"

"Ay, and will stay there for a while. I doubt she'll not be fit to stir abroad until the snow has gone."

"Well, you have come back among us once again, Griff, and you've found two deeds of charity laid ready to your hands—two upon the self-same day. It is a sign, lad, a sign."

"I have seen many signs, Gabriel, since I learned to battle with the moor," said the other gravely.

"And the child? It lies unburied yonder?"

"I buried it yesternight, in the peat above my bit of intake."

"You buried it!" the preacher echoed, aghast. "You robbed it of the Christian burial that was its right?"

Griff could not understand the horror of his tone. Never a man who cared for outward observances, his life had deepened his indifference toward such matters, and it seemed to him a better thing to lie on the open moor, with the fragrant peat above, than to sleep in a graveyard made by men's faltering hands.

"The stars looked down upon the burial," he said, "and surely they were tenderer mourners than any that the child could have. Ay, the deep sky and the stars, and the big, clean moon looked down and said such prayers as you and I know nothing of."

The preacher shook his head. "You were always full of heathen fancies, lad," he murmured. "What can atone to the babe for its lack of Christian burial?"

Gabriel walked on in silence. He had proposed only to set Griff upon his road—"to go agatards with him," as the phrase ran in moorland speech—but he made no mention now of turning back; and Lomax knew that he was coming to do what he could above that little, new-made grave. When they reached the edge of the intake the preacher took his arm.

"Show me the grave," he said.

Griff led him to the peaty ridge and pointed to the spade that marked the burial-ground. And the preacher bared his head to the keen wind, and spoke the burial

service in a clear, low voice, and afterwards prayed noiselessly. A grim scene it was to Griff—the everlasting whiteness of the land, the few scant feet of frozen soil, the thick-set figure of the preacher, and, underneath, the body dead to sight, or sound, or prayer.

When all was done they turned away, and Griff would have had his friend come down and share a simple meal with him; but Hirst remembered many a duty still unperformed, and would not wait.

"As of old," said the other, with a kindly pressure of his arm. "You will forget a meal, but never a duty, Gabriel."

"A meal can be snatched at any time; a duty is lost for ever once we pass it by. There, lad, I might as well preach to the west wind as to you, and—and it may be you follow duty, too, in your own way."

Griff pointed to the intake. "There's good land yonder, hidden by the snow," said he simply.

"Ay, but works cannot stand alone. What of faith, Griff, lad?"

Griff smiled as he nodded a farewell. "Perhaps I have faith too, Gabriel," he said, "but it is the sort that needs the open sky to grow under."

Hester Royd was stooping over the fire when he went in, and she turned with a ladle in her hand.

"She's sleeping," she said, in a low voice, "and has done, on and off, since you went out."

He crossed to the bed and saw that a rounder look, a softer bloom, were stealing into the quiet face. "Poor bairn," he said. "Sleep will do for her what neither you nor I can do, Hester."

"Oh, don't make too sure of that," retorted Hester. "She's been talking in her dreams of a great, brave man who saved her from the snow. You'll have more to see to than intake by and by, more than a cow or two, and a half-dozen sheep. Well, I must be wending home, for there's a lot to be done at Windy Farm, and father will be well-nigh out of his mind if I don't get back."

"What have you in the pan there, Hester?" said Griff, disregarding—nay, scarce noticing—her jealousy toward the stranger.

"Only a fresh brew of porridge. She's had little since you left, and I doubt she'll want something when she wakens."

Hester turned at the door, glanced quickly at the bed and lingeringly at Griff, then went out and up across the frozen snow.

"He thinks himself above such thoughts as women breed in men," she muttered; "but it will be spark to tinder when yond littlish lump of flesh and blood comes to her right mind. Ay, he's soft in that way, is Griff Lomax; what he saves from the moor he loves—and he'll love her."

The pity of it all was evident. Even the cold moor, white, virginal, scant of sympathy as are all virginal things, must have had some inkling of the brewing tragedy as it watched Hester Royd move upward, with her easy swing, to Windy Farm. Her father, though fond enough of her in his quiet way, had never cared over much for any human-kind after his young wife's death; he had turned for comfort to his farm, not to his daughter; and now, as Hester knew, he loved his few niggard acres, his cows, his sheep, better than all else. So long as she was deft with her hands, at milking, butter-making, and the like, Joshua Royd had left her free to enjoy her perilous leisure, and had not asked himself how she employed it.

Neither good nor bad was Hester. She was just a creature of the hills, with a body whole and quick. She must find her mate, and find him speedily; and only in that case could she look to grow into a happy matron. Yet now she was wasting all her powers of life and love. The big, solitary man down yonder at Lostwithens had woven a spell about her. Strong herself, she looked for strength and bigness in a man; but, more than this, Griff's very silence, his aloofness from the warm, red

things of life, gave him an added power to chain the lass's wayward fancy. She had lain, on summer nights, at the edge of rush-fringed pools, and had gazed at her own reflected face, and had rejoiced to find it comely; surely, surely, she had told herself—when the late thrush sang the gloaming in, and all the denes were full of leafy shade—surely this man must open his eyes at last, and see her comeliness, and know that she was longing for his arms.

Yet Griff's eyes had not been opened. He was kind to her, just as he was kind to all living things—no more, no less. And slowly Hester Royd had learned that, whatever wind might come to blow his loneliness to tatters, that wind would never blow from her to him. It was for this reason that she had grudged the stranger's coming; it was for this reason that she moved now with saddened heart across the virgin snow.

"I wish he had found *me* buried in the drift," she said, with a quick, impatient sigh. "I could well have liked to feel his arms about me—and me as weak as a baby, nestling, like, against him. But there! I'm daft to dream of such a thing."

She had reached the stile that led to the Low Meadow, and a great, loose-limbed man was sitting on the topmost stone. The glow in Hester's cheeks, quickened already by the frosty air, grew deeper. There came a sudden, welcome sense that here at least was one who cared for her; and just now she needed to be cared for —nay, she cried out for love and tenderness.

Ned o' Bracken Clough got up as she drew near. He was bigger even than Griff Lomax, but a certain shammocky, loose carriage of his body spoiled his height.

"I've waited for you, lass," he said.

"Oh, it's never a hardship, that, to Ned o' Bracken Clough," said Hester, with a toss of her head. "Waiting, with a stile or a chair to sit on, is your trade in life, eh, lad?"

"I'm a bit of a raffle-coppin. I own to that," the other admitted lazily.

"There's too much of you, Ned. It will take a long while, I doubt, for a thought to travel down from that big head of thine."

"Yet now and then I think of thee, Hester. Come, lass, thou'rt like honey to me, as I'm tired of telling thee."

The moor lay white and silent; there was none in sight; and Hester, needing warmth, crept close into the man's great arms, thinking neither good nor evil, but longing only for a respite against the chill, stern air in which the master of Lostwithens walked.

There was nothing but light-hearted comedy, so it seemed, in this hot embrace. The girl freed herself with a laugh, and Ned o' Bracken Clough looked sheepish, as only a big wooer can. Yet the wind got up and wailed, and Hester's heart was chilled, in spite of herself, as she said good-bye to Ned and went quickly up the frost-bound track.

CHAPTER VII

A DAUGHTER OF THE DANEHOLMES

GRIFF, left alone with his guest, sat by the hearth, watching, now the porridge bubbling in the pan, and now the figure on the bed. The length of time her slumber lasted told him how hard she must have fought against the snow; it was a slumber deep almost as that which is born of the snow itself, when travellers sink into a bed as soft as eider-down and pass by quiet ways to the land beyond man's ken.

Her splendid hair lay loosened all about the blankets. It was rich with the red-gold of a leaf in autumn, and Griff remembered, he knew not why, how merrily the winter's sun had shone, that far-off hunting day, upon the hair of old Squire Daneholme's niece. Hair just such as this it was, with just such a delicate, proud face beneath it.

"Oh, I am dreaming," murmured Griff. "The old days come back too clearly, once I let them in."

Yet still he watched the figure on the bed, and still he dreamed old dreams, until his guest awoke. It might be for an hour that he had watched, or two, or three; he did not know. Returning to the present with a start, Griff saw that she was strong enough to raise herself, and he made haste to shift the heather-pillow to her liking.

"How good you are," she murmured, in her low, rich voice. "I have not found the world over kind till now."

"Nor I," he answered.

There was something pathetic in the brevity of her complaint against destiny; and Trash, aware of her sorrow, came uninvited to the bed and looked up at her with eyes of sympathy. And the woman ruffled his wistful, hairy face with a hand that understood and loved a dog.

"It was he who found you in the snow," said Griff. "You owe your life to Trash."

"Good lad!" she said, with a faint smile. "You're not handsome, as dogs go, but you've a heart hidden under that tawny skin of yours. Tell me, why do you call him Trash?" she broke off, turning to her host.

"I called him Guytrash at the first, because he was so big and brown, so like the Ghostly Dog that the moor-folk talk of. And then, of course, I shortened it to Trash."

"Was it well to give him the name of the Ghostly Dog? Oh, you may laugh at me; once I should have laughed at the conceit myself; but I've lived so long near Wyecollar, and suffered there so much, and found it the very home of ghosts and hobgoblins. Believe me, I've heard Guytrash rushing down the winter winds. There! How foolish you will think me. There are no ghosts nowadays, are there?"

"Yes, there are ghosts," said Griff, with sudden earnestness. "I've kept company too long with Lostwithens Heath to doubt the ghosts."

"And yet you did not fear to jest about the naming of your dog?"

Griff clutched the arm of his chair, with a vehemence that startled his companion. "Fear? My God! I feared nothing—nothing, when first I came here—when first Trash came, too, homeless and friendless like myself, and begged a lodging. Stay, though, there was one fear I had—a daily fear—and that was lest I should not die before another dawn came up above the moor."

The big, self-contained man got up impatiently. In the years that had gone he had kept his counsel well;

and it was strange to him that now he should have said so much. He did not know, indeed, how deep a sympathy there was between the three of them—Trash, and the woman, and himself—the three who were together here on Lostwithens Heath with snow about them, far as the far edges of the sky, and snow lying thick upon the thatch that sheltered them. Nay, the moor itself might be counted a fourth member of this company, which was one in homelessness and in knowledge of the lessons taught by hardship.

"You also understand?" said the woman. "We pray to die—pray till our knees grow tired of bending—and God puts new health into our bodies. And some pray to live, and they are taken. And life turns round and snarls at both—the one who prays to live, and the one who prays to die."

Clearly this woman had some grave quarrel with her fate. The ring of passion in her voice, the scorn with which she spoke of life as of an enemy, were unmistakable.

"See, now, you must have food," said Griff, ashamed in some vague way of the confidence which each had given the other. "You are weak yet, and I shall not let you talk."

He poured out some of the porridge from the pan, sprinkled it with brown sugar and capped the dish with thick, fragrant cream; and even as he went about his work he smiled to think that he should so soon have learned the trick of pampering an invalid. Trash and he took their porridge without help from cream or sugar; but then Trash and he were in fine health.

At first the sick woman turned from the dish; then she bethought her that Griff would be hurt if she declined it. She took one spoonful, two; and hunger, unacknowledged until now, conquered that indolence toward food which keeps the victims of the snow so long in thrall. She finished the dishful, and looked up with grateful eyes—eyes grateful and wistful as the dog's—when she handed back the dish.

"If you care for me so well, I shall soon be strong enough to—to go away again, and leave you here in peace," she said.

"You will not go till the snow does," he answered gruffly.

"But, indeed, I cannot stay. I have robbed you too long already of your—of your bed."

"I've missed my bed too often to keep count of. See you, I saved you, and I am master, and I say that you shall stay until the thaw has come and cleared the moor."

He saw that she had set her will on going, and he meant to overrule her wishes. The brute man was awake in him; he obeyed the elemental law of conquest which had stirred his fathers in the days gone by; this woman was his, and he was master of her, and she should stay at his bidding, go at his bidding, eat and drink at his bidding. Momentary as the man's fierceness was, she saw his wish for mastery, and resented it; as if to assert her will, she half rose from the bed, struggled with her weakness for a while, then fell back among the ling.

"There, there!" said Griff, as if to a child. "I was rough with you, but I know what is for your good. See what I have brought you in for supper," he broke off, lifting the hare from the table and holding it out for her to see.

She smiled, in a quiet, far-off way. "I could not eat it—not yet awhile, at any rate. And yet I talked so bravely of going away, as if I were as strong and well as—as you are," she said, with an envious glance at his healthy bigness.

"You need not go. One roof is surely enough to cover the two of us."

"What am I to do?" she went on pitifully, not heeding what he said. "I cannot be a burden on you—and yet I am weak—and, oh, it is so cold out yonder!"

Instinctively she shivered, glancing at the window, as if the recent peril were close about her once again.

"See," broke in Griff, "I have lived for years here without a thing to talk to except old Trash. Will it harm me, do you think, to enjoy a little company for once?"

"You are good—oh, you are good to me," she murmured.

Ay, thought Griff, as he would be good to a foundered sheep, or a cow that was drowning in the bog. He answered nothing, however—only sat watching the fire-faces glow and crumble and reshape themselves into new turns of feature. It was long before the woman spoke again, and her voice, though quiet, had a new ring of strength in it.

"It has been a long, long day," she said, "and I have thought of what has passed. At first I would not think at all—only I knew, each time I woke, that you had taken my baby and hidden him out yonder underneath the snow; and I hated you, and said that you were cruel. But then I seemed to see you in a clearer light—your face as you bent over me last night, the tender way in which you broke the news to me this morning; and I knew that you had done it for the best."

"I had no choice," Griff murmured, "and—and I said a sort of prayer over him at the last."

Her tears fell quietly, as healing rain falls on the parched summer fields. She did not know whence came this easing of her burden; how could she know that Griff, from his close, long fight with suffering and with hardship, had learned a rugged strength of sympathy that went out to one and all and would not be resisted? Royd of Windy Farm had proved this sympathy, in the days when ill-fortune, of crop-sickness or body-sickness, was darkening round him; sick cattle felt it when he talked to them, and physicked them, and smoothed their drooping heads; he had what Ling Crag folk called Sad Man's Luck—the gift of bringing to others the peace which in himself he lacked.

A silence fell between them, a silence more intimate

than speech. Griff looked up at last; he wished to let slumber the memory of that grave upon the heath; and yet he had to tell her one more thing that might make for her comfort.

"This afternoon a preacher walked with me as far as the moor edge, and I told him of your coming, and of—of the child. And he came to the grave, and repeated the service over it, so that the child should not lack Christian burial."

A harder light came into the woman's eyes. "Christian burial?" she echoed, half sitting up again. "I have lived with Christians of late, and—and I have found none so cruel, none. Oh, they prayed—prayed at all hours, and grudged me the least happiness, and sought out sins in others as children seek for primroses in spring. Nay, I had rather have your prayers than his."

"Yet he's a good man, and a kindly, this preacher."

"It may be, but I do not want his prayers. See you," she broke off, with sudden anger, "do you think I shall ever see the snow, ever feel the frost-wind in my face, but I shall hate them? They will remind me always of the child they took from me. And so it is with your folk who pray and preach; I have suffered at their hands, suffered grievously, and the memory cannot fade."

"You have no creed, then?" said Lomax, lifting his eyes again from the red pictures in the peats.

It seemed not possible that this woman of the exquisite, soft face and dainty spirit should have as little sense of these matters as himself. Surely some hard-and-fast religious creed — the trustful woman's surety of precepts made for her to lean upon—could scarcely stand far off from her. And so he looked at her in wonderment, and repeated his quiet question.

"Yes, I have a creed," she cried. "I believe that life is hard, and men and women harder than the life that shuts them in. I believe that we were brought into the world to suffer, and to ask why, and to get no answer till they screw the coffin-lid down on us."

"Still, we can suffer and pretend we don't," said Griff. "Pride is a fine comrade at such times."

She watched him curiously, as he sat with musing eyes and back-thrown head. Another man, she thought, would have sought for the secret of her bitterness; but he did not. With the same calm acceptance of what was, the same calm avoidance of all curiosity, he had asked no questions as to her journey over snow-deep moors; and she felt that here was a man at last, a man who could befriend for sake of kindliness alone, and leave his neighbour's past to bury its own dead. For this cause she, womanlike, began to think of telling him all; and yet again the tale was sad, and she was weary past belief, and, perhaps, before the snow had gone from Ling Crag Moor, she would find a time more fitting for the tale.

Yet, as she watched him, a curious anger clouded all her warmth of heart. He was so big, so passionless, so far away, as he sat there brooding over the peats: he had forgotten her already; his scheme of things—whatever it was—was large enough to cover and absorb a dozen such little lives as hers. It was a touch of Hester's feeling toward Griff, and the two women, far asunder as they were in character, joined hands and were at one in this—that they resented the outlook of a man who could stand alone and find contentment in the stars.

She moved restlessly, and startled him; and she was glad—glad with a foolish sense of triumph—that she had chained his glance again.

"Do you not wonder?" she began. "Do you not wonder how I came to be snowbound yonder on the moor?"

Griff laughed, a little sombrely; for his thoughts had been long thoughts and sad. "I never cease to wonder," he said. "What is there but wonder everywhere? Life and death are stranger matters than finding you or anyone on Ling Crag Moor."

Again she was impatient. Yet she could not but be

awed by the look on his wind-stained face; he was no longer the kindly friend, prompt to rescue and to act, for in his eyes there was that visionary light which comes to men who live alone, far-off from vanities and close to the bosom of the one great Mother. Not the quiet waters of a moorland tarn, reflecting sky and cloud, could be more passionless and still than Griff was at this moment.

"Why, you are like the moor itself," she faltered—"as still and as unquestioning. You do not ask my name, nor how I came to you—neither did the moor, when it wrapped me in its snow."

"In your own time you will tell me all," said Griff—"or you will not tell me, and I shall know you think it better so."

"Yes," she said, and was grateful for his trust, although she shivered, as with cold, because of his tranquillity.

Presently she slept again, and Griff, with a long glance at her, went softly to the door. Trash was for following him, but a muttered, "Guard, lad," and a finger pointed toward the bed, told him where his duty lay. And so the dog sat watching by the bed, and the man pulled to the door behind him, and strode across the frozen heath. With one of his quick changes, his dreaminess had gone, and he was once more alert and practical. He had remembered that women gently nurtured need certain services which such as Hester Royd would never think of; and late as it was—eight of the clock or so, judging by the moon—he meant to cross to Windy Farm.

A low mist had hugged the moor throughout the afternoon; but this had disappeared, and the wise, clear-shining moon made fairyland of ridge and hollow. Once, at the head of Conie Crag Ravine, where the larches waved their slender branches in the wind, Griff heard a music that had not sounded in his ears for many a year. Faint, yet clear, like music from an elfin belfry, the frozen beads of mist upon the larches were ringing

one against the other. There is no sound like this in all the world; at darkest midnight the moorward-born would know it and be glad, for they say that the ringing of these fairy-bells is a token of great happiness to those who catch their note.

For a moment he stayed to listen, then went forward over the hard snow. The dog at Windy Farm gave tongue as he slipped and scrambled up the last brink-field and into the yard, and Hester was at the door before he reached it.

"Oh, it's you," she said briefly, as he stood on the threshold. "Has something chanced to that bit of daintiness that you call a woman?"

"Nothing, but—well, there are matters she may need —and I thought—"

"You thought I should know naught of such matters when you left her to me this morning?"

"Well, you might have a change of wearing-gear, you see, and—and she would like a bath, I fancy."

Hester stood in the moonlit porch, her arms akimbo, enjoying this diffidence which was so unlike his usual quick air of mastery.

"I asked her this morning," she said slowly, "and she had no strength, save to let me wash her hands and her face and her two cold feet. Lord save us," she broke off, as a new thought struck her, "you'll be thinking she should have had hot water for her washing? You're of the quality, and so is she; and she like as she couldn't bear cold water, I reckon. Nay, I never thought of that! Such as us must just run out to the beck, sun or snow, and wash God's flesh with God's cold water. Here, father, there's Mr. Lomax," she broke off, leading the way to the house-place, where Royd was chewing the end of a cold pipe beside the hearth.

The room was full of peat-glow and the smell of baking. On the table by the window lay a row of tea-cakes, fresh from the oven, and an apple-pasty that still simmered and sent out brown bubbles at its edges.

Such odours, warm and fragrant as the peat-fire itself, Griff had known long ago in his mother's kitchen, and to-night they brought back to him a sense of home.

"I'm late with my baking," said Hester. "You kept me so long at Lostwithens that I couldn't put hand to rolling-pin till four of the clock."

"Well, neighbour," said the farmer, waving his pipe-stem toward the vacant chair, "you're latish-like. Sit you down, and I'll tell you of that dappled cow of mine. She's poorly yet, though I fancy that bottle of stuff you brought her has eased her innards, so to say."

"I can't stay long," said Griff. "I only came to see if Hester would walk back with me, and bring some wearing-gear for that poor lass down yonder. She'll lie more easily to-night if she is looked to."

"And there'll be water to be boiled, father, and all to be made soft as a feather-bed," said Hester, with a side glance at Lomax. "Must I go and take her a shift, and make a baby of her, as Mr. Lomax asks?"

"Oh, ay, you must go, lass," said Royd, "for we've a few back-reckonings of kindness due to Mr. Lomax, and to his father before him."

He paused, and eyed his guest with droll gravity.

"Yet I'm feared, Mr. Lomax," he went on, by and by. "I can see a man taking thought for a sheep, or a pig, or a cow—'specially a cow—and never trouble my head about it. But when there's a wench to deal with, and when thought of her takes him across three miles of moor 'twixt eight o'clock and nine of a cold night—well, I have my doubts."

Griff only laughed, and took a pull at the jug of home-brewed ale which the farmer handed to him; and soon afterwards he had said good-night, and was swinging down the fields with Hester. She had brought night-gear and what not, and had laughed slily in Griff's face as she promised to do all that "*a man* could think of for a wench's comfort."

Hester lost her air of mockery, however, before the last mile was covered. She was thinking of Ned o' Bracken Clough, of the persistency with which he had wooed her, of the kisses he had given her this afternoon; she was thinking, too, of the aloofness of the man beside her, of the woman waiting for them at Lostwithens, of her own heartache.

"Oh, Griff Lomax, I wish it had been you!" she cried.

"Wish? What do you wish, Hester?" he asked, roused from one of his intimate, quiet communings with the nature that was bread and drink to him.

"Nothing," she answered. "I'm silly at times, and I speak my thoughts aloud."

He did not understand. He simply was living on another plane, where the white stars, and the dark, illimitable sky, and the voice of that old scapegrace Wanderer, the wind, had words for him. He did not know that beside him was a girl who lived near to mother-earth, a girl who sought her rightful mate. It was a tragedy in brief, and by and by Ned o' Bracken Clough would gain by Griff's neglect.

When they reached the hut, Griff left his companion at the door and went to the mistals; and it was here that Hester found him, an hour or so later after she had done her work.

"Well?" he said, looking up from the Irish heifer with whom he had been gossiping. "Have you made her as comfortable as may be?"

"Oh, she'll do. I got that round bath of yours, and I filled it nigh brimful with hot water; and then, when she'd finished her washing and her rubbing, I fettled her up for the night. By the Heart, she looked as pleased as a bairn! She'd been needing these bits of night-gear and what not; but when she wanted to thank me, like, I told her it was all your doing. And now, do you know her name, I wonder?"

"No, she has not told me."

"She let it slip just now, while I was tucking her up in the blankets. Well, I knew she was gentle-born, so she might as well be a Daneholme as anybody else—or a Lomax, for that matter," she added, with a touch of her own dry humour—"or Lucifer. The three of you might just as well change names, for you're one as proud as the other."

Griff leaned back against the stall. He saw again the figure of a girl with red-brown hair and eager face, who waited in the midst of crying hounds until he brought the fox's brush to her. He saw, too, the woman who had come to claim his hospitality; her face had now no eagerness at all in it; but face and eyes and hair were not to be mistaken, once he had the key to her identity. How could he have missed the likeness at the first?

"A Daneholme?" he echoed. "Why, to be sure, I might have known."

"It was something I said about the old Squire made her tell me she was his niece. Well, we're getting fine birds out here on Ling Crag Moor. It won't hold us poorer sort after awhile."

"You talk a good deal of nonsense, Hester," said Griff, in the tranquil, half-amused tone which moved the girl sometimes to anger, at other times to tearfulness.

"Then I'll be taking my nonsense home with me," she answered promptly. "It's late as it is, and father will be waiting up."

"I'll see you as far as the brink-fields, then."

She looked at him with a sudden blaze of anger in her sloe-black eyes. "Nay, I'm no fine lady. I need no coddling, and I can find my own way to Windy Farm. Go back to your bit of a ladykin, for I reckon she wants you more than I'm ever like to do."

Griff halted for a moment in the mistal-yard, watching Hester move up the moonlit moor with her free, graceful swing; then he turned, and wondered, as he knocked at his own door and entered, what was amiss with Hester Royd these last few days.

Hester, for her part, had no sense of the coldness of the night, the dreariness of all these frozen leagues of snow. Her heart was hot with disappointment, anger, passion; and when she chanced on Ned o' Bracken Clough—he was not seeking Hester this time, but was watching, gun in hand, for the brown of a hare against the moon-bright snow—she let him take her in his arms without resistance. Nay, more, she kissed him with a fury that astonished him.

"Thank God that you're a *man*, Ned," she whispered. "You're not a bit of stony moor."

Perhaps she wronged Griff, for at that moment he was conscious of the first faint stirrings of romance—of personal romance, apart from that wider glamour of wind and weather which had served him well through five long years of toil. When he went into the hut, after watching Hester climb up into the moor, a warm glow met him, and his guest was lying with her face toward the peats. Softer the face looked; and the great hazel eyes met his with trust and welcome.

"I have to thank you for—for remembering certain things," she said. "A man, I fancied, would never have thought of the little comforts that mean so much to us."

There was no trace of shame in her acknowledgment, scarcely a sense that the intercourse between herself and Griff had anything unusual about it. The desert moor was round about them, warding off the pale conventions of the valley-lands. Her late escape from death, moreover, her bitter sorrow, Griff's own aloofness from the things of rule and precept, precluded all shame. She felt like a little child again, shielded by a strong man's arm against the wind and snow.

"Your Hester is kindly, too," she went on; "though, if I did not know these upland folk, I should think she grudged each little kindness done."

"You know the moor-folk?" murmured Griff. "Why, yes, a Daneholme would; for they have always loved their lands that border Ling Crag Moor."

The colour stole into her cheeks. "How did you know my name?" she asked.

"Hester told me a moment since that you were the old Squire's niece."

Looking at her now, Griff found no difficulty in tracing the remembered features. Six years had gone since that hunting day, but all the suffering which had followed had scarcely changed the wilful, dainty face, the russet hair, the eyes that were as trusty and as deep as dawn-skies are at moorland summer-tides. She had been a girl then, and now she was a woman; but she was the same who had been in at the death with him when only they two had cleared the last stiff fence.

"Ah, I had forgotten that Hester asked so many questions that at last I told her who I was, not meaning to. Yet what does it matter? I should have told you soon; it was only your right, after you had given me such a welcome.—You knew my uncle, then?"

"Yes, I knew him. He was a man, the Squire," Griff murmured—"one of the stiffest and the best I ever met."

The other's eyes lit up. "You cared for him too?"

"I scarcely knew him well enough; but I would have wished to."

"Few loved him, and many hated; but there were no half-measures—he claimed nothing short of hate or love. I went to him as a lassie, the height of your table yonder, when I was left fatherless and motherless; and I lived with him until"—her face clouded—"until the break came, two years ago."

She was silent for awhile; then, with an odd smile, "It has been so always with the Daneholmes," she said; "the deeper our love for one another, the more we fight. I was wilful always, I suppose, and followed my own way; and uncle, though he would not have had me yielding, would rage and storm whenever I thwarted him afresh; and when his rage was gone, he would take me on his knee, and promise me a faster pony, or

another dog, because I had had the courage to fight against him. Oh, they were good days, and I loved him so!"

Griff understood this temper. It had been his own and his father's before him, as well as old Squire Daneholme's.

"Ay, he loved a fighter," he said. "I met him once by night—I was helping friends to steal his game—and he came on us with half a dozen keepers, and he and I went at it till I got him down. Lord! I remember how he gripped my hand, as soon as he could rise, and would not be content until I had promised to come and dine with him."

The Squire's niece laughed; the story was so in keeping with her knowledge of the uncle whom she had loved, with whom, too, she had quarrelled.

"And yet I lost my last fight with him, and he did not forgive," she went on by and by, her voice growing grave. "Oh, it's a dreary tale, and it seems far off when I see the warmth and the light in here and think of the waste of snow outside. I have a fancy—sick folk are full of them—that from this time there will always lie a lone, impassable waste between the future and the past. Yet God knows what future there can be for me!"

Griff would not have her sadder than need be, and set about preparing their rude supper; and while he moved about, and while they ate, and long after she had settled into sleep, and left him watching by the hearth, he wondered—as far as power to wonder was left him—at the chance which had brought a daughter of the Daneholmes, the proudest race in all the countryside except his own, to share his dwelling in the wilderness.

"It is no chance," he murmured once, as he fondled the dog's rough ears. "There is no such thing as chance in life—but there is destiny."

And Trash whined low and eagerly, as if, at another time, he would have barked for some cause of gladness unexplained. Outside the hut, moreover, the stars

wheeled round the frost-keen sky, and the snow lay league on league above the frozen land; and neither snow nor stars had faith in chance, though they were sure of destiny.

Griff sat on and on, and sleep came no way near him. Why had he not told this woman, he asked himself, that he and she had met before? Why, just because he wished, with a foolish zest in the romance, to keep his slender secret from her for awhile. Whatever frost might hold the moor, one thing was certain—that a soft wind had come, whether it stayed or not, to thaw the hard rind of his life.

"This will not do," he said at last, settling himself into his chair. "Ephraim's wife is to be buried in the morning, and I must not break my promise to be there. I must snatch what sleep I can."

Yet, even as he dropped asleep, he thought of that lone road to Trawdon, and was glad of the labour of snow-clearing which had led to his finding of a woman on the moor.

CHAPTER VIII

A BURYING

GRIFF was up betimes on the next morning, for the funeral of Ephraim Shackleton's wife was to take place at an early hour. It was a far step to Trawdon kirkyard and back again; the men, moreover, could not work upon the land so long as the snow lasted, and it was better to get all done as long before the early gloaming as was possible.

The sick woman was awake when Griff, his milking done, returned from washing himself at the ice-cold spring which fed Lostwithens.

"You are going out?" she said, marvelling at the fresh, strong look of him.

"Yes, I have promised an old neighbour to help him to bury his wife."

She shivered, remembering the terrors of the snow-girt land. "And you will go far?" she asked.

"Five miles to Ling Crag first, and then another five to Trawdon, where the burying is to be."

"Oh, be careful of yourself! These moors are treacherous, and—"

"Not treacherous now," he broke in, with an easy laugh. "See, the sun is coming through the window, and the snow is hard as stone. Will you have breakfast with me now, and then I'll leave old Trash to guard you?"

"Trash knows he saved me," said the woman, with one of those tender smiles which came so seldom to her

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lips. "You should see the big, wise air he has when he is left on guard."

"There are few better souls than Trash's; some day he will learn to talk, and be human altogether," laughed Griff, as he made the preparations for their breakfast.

A half-hour later, after bidding farewell to his guest, after a second warning from her that he must guard against the treachery of the moor, he was swinging over the frozen miles that lay between Lostwithens and Ling Crag. In his heart there was a curious sense of well-being, as if the God of his old days were throned again and in His place; and again he told himself, as he had done last night, that he was glad to pay this tribute to Ephraim's wife, since she had been the cause of his finding a lost woman out by Wynyates Kirk.

At Ling Crag, where Ephraim Shackleton's cottage hugged the snowbound road, all was brisk and busy as village life can only be when a wedding or a funeral is toward. Ephraim's wife, who lay awaiting the last tokens of respect before her journey to the grave already dug for her at Trawdon, had been ailing for the past twelvemonth; she had known her end was near, and, just as she had prepared her shroud of the finest linen, so, long before she had taken to her bed for good, she had busied herself with the making of the elderberry wine that was to grace her burial feast. Good wine it was, well fortified with heartsome brandy, and even in the last days of her illness it was a solace to her to think that Ephraim would not be a shamed host when the mourners came to eat and drink.

And now the day had come. The hands that had made the wine lay quietly folded underneath the shroud, but the wine stood, bottle after goodly bottle, beside the spiced loaves and the cracknels that crowded the table-room. Friends and kinsfolk clustered round the board —each new-comer going up the crooked stair, when first he entered, to view the corpse—and on the road without there stood a sleigh—a great, rough-fashioned square of

wood, such as the moor-folk use for carrying hay into the laithe in the blithe July weather. Two thick-thewed cart-horses were harnessed to the sleigh, and the wind, as it swept by them, seemed to touch their withers with a cruel finger.

"There's only Mr. Lomax missing," said Ephraim, "and he promised he'd be here in time to walk with us."

"He like as he fears good human-folk," put in a neighbour. "What ails the man, I cannot say; but he seems fair like a mad dog, that turns and snaps at folk he cared for once. By the Heart, he was as fine a lad as ever I set eyes on—poaching, or fighting, or riding over a five-barred gate — before his troubles came."

"Well, he can handle a spade with any man," said Ephraim, "and he's got a tidy notion of the way to dig a trench and make good soil from barren peat. And by that token," he broke off, glancing through the window, "he's waiting yonder by the sleigh, talking to the horses as if they were own brothers. Maybe he's not so fond of house-walls nowadays, and he's seen the corpse already. So we'll be making a start, friends, or there'll be more dark than daylight left us."

Griff, in good truth, could find no heart to go indoors. His late sense of fellowship had left him, and he shrank —as a man knowing his own wildness—from contact with his kind. Fellowship was well, and yesterday he had welcomed it; but no man can live lonely and apart for years, and yet escape that deep, recurrent shyness which takes him unawares when he least looks for it. For this reason—and Ephraim Shackleton had shown an unwonted delicacy in guessing it—Griff had stayed without, talking to the horses in their own tongue, and striving to make them happier under the keen lash of the wind.

At last the coffin was brought down, and laid upon the sleigh. All Ling Crag village was there that day,

and folk from Marshcotes and from Cranshaw; and two by two they took their places behind the rude carriage that was to take Ephraim's wife to Trawdon kirkyard.

There were five miles of frozen road to be crossed at a reverent foot-pace, and the wind, with a snarl in it, was blowing cold from the frozen leagues of snow. Yet none shirked a plain duty; delicate lasses and ailing men were here, and, when they coughed, they made believe that they were sobbing, lest any man should guess what this cold journey cost them. Oh, sad it was, and drear beyond belief—the living, reckless of the death that came as near almost to some of them as it had come to the dead woman on the sleigh—the sunny, clear-cold sky — the unheeding, rose-tipped wastes of snow.

Slowly they passed Scartop Water, and made upward until they reached the end of the road which Ephraim and his friends had dug from out the snow. They had to lift the sleigh here, four feet or so, to the upper level of the snow-crust; and then they made forward up and down the blinding line of white, until they passed by Dangerous Corner, and crossed the boundary line into Lancashire. The horses, quiet till now, could no longer resist the keenness of the wind, that sent the hot blood racing through their veins; despite their driver—despite the slippery, downhill foothold that threatened ruin—they started at the gallop; the sleigh, with its quiet burden, went bumping, slipping, sliding, from side to side of the highway, and consternation was written plain on every face. The stiff rise to the Herders Tavern checked them, however, at the last, and the driver brought them to a halt. The mourners struggled up, and once again the dreary route was taken.

Through Wyecollar they went, with its memories of the Riding Squire, and its old hall smothered by the snow; on between the snow-capped walls, between the chilly pasture-lands, till at last they gained their goal. The grave was ready, and the frozen handful of mould

was dropped upon the coffin-lid, and women wept aloud.

And then they left her to her chilly peace, and the graveyard was empty, save for a sexton sweating at his spade; and, one and all, as they moved down to the village inn, felt lighter for the load that they had left behind.

Something there is about a burial that sinks a man's spirits to the depths, and lifts him afterwards to a lightness which he may fight against, but which will conquer him. At the graveside these folk had felt the ache of loss, the fear of the day that should see them in like case; they had shown their tenderness by that long pilgrimage which chilled both heart and body; and now that all was done they rose, as David of old arose from the body of his child, and went to the feast.

Ephraim was not a rich man, even among his farmer-kind; but he had saved against a day like this—his own burial or his wife's—and there was no stint of drink or victuals in the Trawdon inn. First, there was rum for such as cared for it; and the women—their faces showing red, with frost and tears, against black-bordered handkerchiefs—were no less willing than the men. Tongues began to wag, and the dead woman's virtues mellowed as the glasses went their round and the hour of tea grew near.

"There were few to beat her, Ephraim," said his neighbour, holding the blood-red drink against the light.

"Ay, few," said Ephraim, with the air of one who knows himself a great man in the public eye. "She had a tongue, of course, but what wench hasn't? Ay, a tongue as long as a bobbinful o' thread she had, and she was not by way of sparing it."

"No good wife does," put in Ned o' Bracken Clough, who, like Hester and old Joshua Royd, had crossed many a mile of moor in order to be present at so formal and neighbourly a gathering as a burying.

A sly titter went from one to another of the lasses.

"No good wife does," repeated Ned, lazily settling his great length and bulk into the settle-corner. "I've always heard that a deal of sense drops off a wench's tongue."

"You'd better take one to your own hearthstone, then," put in Hester, with an odd side-glance at him. "I'd never take aught on hearsay—least of all the length of a lass's tongue—if I called myself a man."

A subdued laugh went up, and Ned o' Bracken Clough looked round upon the company with an air of droll self-pity. "Nay, I'm not good enough to mate with anything so fine as a woman," he said. "I'm that modest that I just dither when I see a petticoat."

Another laugh rang through the parlour, more unrestrained this time; for Ned was the lightest lover in the countryside.

"She was a grand lass, nattery or no," went on Ephraim, asserting himself once more, as became the widower of the hour. "Many a night I've come in, mazed and wet as sweat could make me from coat to marrow, at time of hay-gathering, and she was always ready with dry shirt, and breeches, and what not, and a panful of something steaming on the fire. Oh ay, a wife's a good wife when she knows the inward cravings of a man."

"Few wives do," said Ned, with elaborate gravity. "They only know when his boots are mucky, or if he's stayed a while too long at the nearest tavern."

"Well," put in a tart matron, "you'll know about women, Ned—the giddier sort—if any raffle-coppin does in Ling Crag or in Marshcotes."

"Nay, I'm that modest, like. I'm feared to look on the same side of the road," protested Ned.

The laughter was boisterous now, for the rum had passed round rapidly, and reaction from the late scene was conquering one and all. The ailing folk forgot to cough; the old, old men, who had scarce found strength to totter hither, began to remember and repeat the tales

of ancient days, of frolics long since past. Little Barbara Cunliffe, the idol of the countryside a generation since, moved to and fro among their stories as if she were present here among them. Squire Daneholme played his part in their stories of lang syne, and fearsome stories of the Brown Dog were woven into the threads of talk. And Griff stood, big and silent, by the window, and listened to it all, and felt again that the hand of olden days was on him, compelling him to comradeship and brotherhood.

Ned o' Bracken Clough got up from his corner of the settle by and by, and crossed to Griff's side. They had been fellow-poachers, fellow-fly-by-nights, in the old wild days, and Ned was glad to meet his friend again after some years of silence.

"Why, man, you're altered," was his greeting. "Lostwithens has given you a look of the wind, and muscles such as I for one shall never earn."

"It's good to see you, Ned," said the other, surprised at his own gladness in the meeting. "You're still the same to look at. Gad, what sport we used to have!"

Ned rubbed his big red hands together and laughed. "There's been less frolic since you shut yourself up yonder at Lostwithens. Why, we talk of you and miss you yet."

Again Griff felt himself drawn toward the free, remembered life. Had not the landlord of the Eagle Tavern said the same? Was it nothing that old friends should miss him after long absence?

"Ned," he muttered, after a while, "the old stuff works again. Let's have a night together soon among the old Squire's pheasants."

"Done!" cried Ned o' Bracken Clough.

"And if we can happen on a bit of a fight—well, so much the better, for a fight does seem to sweeten a man's victuals."

Hester Royd was looking at the two men, as they stood with the wintry sunlight from the window shining

full on them. In a vague way she knew that she was making a final choice, and the choice lay between the two biggest men that Ling Crag had known for generations past. Ned o' Bracken Clough, indeed, was the taller by an inch; but he lacked Griff's compact ease of poise and shoulder-width. The one had loafed through life, the other had made spade-way, foot by foot, and showed the clean, hard traces of his toil.

"If only Mr. Lomax had a heart in that big body of his!" she murmured. "He's wasted as a man. He could ask and have, if he'd a mind, whenever he comes among us silly women."

In that moment she made her choice, and sighed as she made it, knowing that Ned o' Bracken Clough was the lesser man.

The others, meanwhile, were going forward with their old-time tales, until in the midst of it all—gossip, and rum, and ease after grievous toil—the landlord came and summoned them to tea.

It was a gallant meal enough. Ham and cheese and spiced loaf; strange cakes of differing shapes and colours; minced-pies left over from the Christmas junketings; tea for the ostensible drink, but with it little pots of rum that served as a second kind of cream for most of the sombre-gowned, bright company.

Griff, for his part, sat and watched it all, and wondered; and yet he understood their merriment, for he had learned to see life as it was, forgetting to measure its grief and gaiety by any rules but nature's. Life was untamable, after all; and when these moor-folk, who held the good gift still, had paid their toll of grief, it was inevitable—nay, it was seemly—that they should be glad once more. Even the widower was gay; he was at the head of a well-garnished table, and his friends had said kind words about the dead, and he was a young man still, with hope in him that he would live and toil and thrive through many a coming year. Moreover, Betty o' th' Nab was beside him—Betty, of whom Gabriel

Hirst had spoken as a would-be successor to the dead wife — Betty, who had been casting tender eyes in Ephraim's direction, and who told him, plain as eyes could do it, that he was the finest man about the countryside, at least in one buxom lass's estimation.

Gabriel Hirst himself, at no time given to merriment, looked as grim as one of his own Wrath and Judgment sermons; but his wife, like Griff, could understand more easily the need that men and women have of mirth. She was sitting on Griff's right, as it chanced, and he was again aware of the sense of fellowship. Greta was at all times like the wind and the sun and the blue of a good-tempered sky; she made folk feel at one with God and man, and merely by living preached better sermons than her husband. And, with it all, she was so roguish, so quick to see the gay side of a matter, so utterly at peace with destiny, which had given her a good man and a brace of ruddy, mischief-loving lads.

"Gabriel has told me something," she said, in a low voice covered by the buzz of talk about them.

"What, of the stranger at Lostwithens?" Griff asked.

"Yes. He is sure that she will be your undoing. Gabriel always thinks that of any woman except his wife."

"And you?" laughed Griff.

"I? Why, I am *quite* sure that she has been sent to help you."

She looked steadily at him, then went on.

"Suppose you set yourself a penance for some fault that you have judged too harshly? Well, is there never to be an end of penance? Oh, take a happy woman's word for it, that life was never meant to be a prison."

Griff looked at her. Little Greta of the Mill—the Greta who had coquetted with him idly once in the far-back summer days—had no resemblance to this woman who held her happiness secure and who was not ashamed to acknowledge her debts to God. Something stirred in the man; he wanted to live amongst his fellows again;

austere, remote as he had been, the heart of him was ready to be touched.

"Greta," he said, "I dare not leave it yet. I have set myself the work to do—a penance, if you like—and I have grown to love the penance. Let me finish it."

"Finish it," she answered softly; "and try to keep your guest with you. I have a touch of second-sight about this stranger lassie, and she is meant to be *your luck*."

Griff answered nothing. He was thinking of the wife who lay in Marshcotes churchyard, of the love she had given him, of his boy who had died upon a certain snowy night. Luck lay behind him, so he thought; but Greta, calm amid the one happiness which can teach so much to man or woman, was glad that she had spoken; it seemed to her that this big fellow, with the wind-stains on his cheeks and the strength that comes of battle round about his clean-cut mouth, was after all a sick man to be nursed, by kindly ways, back to the heart-health he had lost.

"I want to share my happiness with others," she said, after a long silence. "Men and women need each other, and you must not go lonely any longer."

Griff had no time to answer, even if he had been minded to. Ephraim Shackleton had risen from the board, and his voice was gay as he cried that they must be "wending home." One and all got up, and pressed forward to the tavern door. The gloaming had long since faded into night, and the moon lay round and blue above the eerie lands of snow; yet the five miles home seemed lighter to the fancy than they had done in full, keen daylight, and sweethearts paired and slunk away into the night.

Griff joined Farmer Royd, as their ways lay together, and after them came Hester and Ned o' Bracken Clough. Ned was full of good rum, and even in his soberer moments he blew lightly as the wind.

"Hester," he whispered, "I'm your man."

"Well, I looked for a better," she answered, "but beggars cannot be choosers."

"Then kiss me as you did last night," he said, with his big, easy laugh. "There's never a woman on the moorside has kissed me yet like you—and that's saying a deal," he added reflectively.

"How many have kissed you, then, if a modest maid may ask?"

"I don't recall. You've lost my memory for me, Hetty."

The moor, it seemed, cold and white as it was, was minded to be kind to-night; for not only Ned o' Bracken Clough was speeding with his wooing. Ephraim Shackleton, the widower, was crossing the heath in another direction with Betty o' th' Nab; and Betty was soft and melting as the wind which comes to usher in a thaw. Ephraim, for his part, had mellowed quietly under the touch of a last mouthful of old rum, and Betty o' th' Nab had little trouble in the gaining of her end. Betty was a fine, upstanding girl, swart of face and bold of her great, black eyes; she had lived unwedded, if not unkissed, for five-and-twenty years, and she found little joy in spinsterhood.

"I'm fearful feared of the moor," she whispered, clasping Ephraim's arm as he stood without the tavern.

"Feared, my bonnie?" cried Ephraim. "Well, then, it's two and two from this to Ling Crag, and I'll keep the boggarts off thee."

"You're so strong, Ephraim, and—and so soft with a silly woman. I'd feel safer, like, with you." Her voice, strong for the kine-call in workaday hours, was soft as a mating blackbird's now.

Ephraim swelled beneath his broadcloth; here was a wench who knew a man when she saw him, and womenfolk were, by nature, full of dreads. He pressed the plump arm to his side, and soon they were following the snow-blue road that led home through Wyecollar.

When they came to the outer fence that strove to

hide the old Hall from the world, she pressed against his side. "They say the old Squire rides," she whispered, "and I'm feared. What if he, and his horse, and his fearsome, yelping dogs, came racketing down the Dene?"

"Why, I should hold thee tight and sure, lass; and never a ghost of Squire or devil would come 'twixt thee and me."

The grief, the rum, and the night air were having their will of Ephraim. He knew himself gigantic, and his heart, too long bowed down by sorrow, arose and claimed its due. This was the hour of Betty o' th' Nab, and well she knew it; for the moor women told many a tale to one another, when their men-folk were abroad, of the weddings that had come from burying-times. Griff, had he been there to watch the scene, would have smiled, the slow, deep smile of knowledge, and have told himself that the world is ever the same—in intake, in rearing of farm-beasts, in the tangled human ways, life and death, grief and gladness, burial and wedlock go hand in hand together.

It may be that Betty o' th' Nab was greater than herself to-night. Her moment had come, for victory or defeat, and she made the most of it. For a while she held her peace; and then, as they went over the powdery snow and past the doorway of the Herders Tavern, she spoke in the soft, warm voice that any man would like to hear upon a moonlit night.

"She was a good wife to thee, Ephraim," said Betty o' th' Nab.

"Ay, for sure. I'll never find one like her."

Betty was not discouraged, but patiently unwound her net.

"She was that thoughtful, and that kind. I would never follow a man myself as she followed thee."

He pressed her arm with exceeding tenderness. "Oh, ay, you would, my lass. I can hear it in thy voice."

"Voices are wind, Ephraim, and she did well by thee. I tell thee my heart's been sore, when I saw how weakly-like she was, and how you had to see to the children while she was laid in bed. It's a sad thing, Ephraim, to have an ailing wife."

"Well," said he, with sudden relief, as of confession, "it *was* hard at times. But then we want too much. A man cannot have a bonnie wife, and a strong wife, and a good wife, all in one. Seems like Providence; if the wench is strong and bonnie—same as some I know—" He paused, and pressed her arm yet closer to his side.

"Well, Ephraim?—Sakes, how it makes me shiver!"

She pointed to the dreary, moonlit moor, and took the opportunity to lean once more against his side. He could feel the warmth of her, in spite of wind and frost.

He wavered for a moment, then went on in his own dogged fashion. "If they're strong and bonnie, they're by way of being light," he said, as if discussing some usual question of manures and crops.

Betty o' th' Nab crept nearer still, and somehow he found his arm about her waist.

"Am I lusty and bonnie, Ephraim?" said she.

"You're both, my lass."

"And there's none can call me lightsome."

Ephraim pondered the situation for a moment, then tried to grip her with a sudden huge embrace. But Betty o' th' Nab had the hunting instinct of the uplands, and she wished to play a while.

"Nay, now!" she said—and pressed his arm for all that—"Nay, now, I thought you'd bear yourself more seemlier, like."

There was a silence of a mile. Good victuals, and good drink, and the warmth of a bonnie lass beside him, had scattered Ephraim's wits abroad. He knew what he wished to say, but had no words in which to say it, till Betty o' th' Nab supplied them.

"Ephraim," said she, just as they neared the foot of Scartop Rise.

"Ay, lass?"

"You've three little children. Who's to see after them, while you're at sowing and at hay-gathering?"

"Why, thee, lass," said Ephraim, and he stood on the moon-blue snow, and took her in his arms with a power beyond denying.

"I've always thought thee the best man ever I set eyes on," said Betty o' th' Nab.

Griff, meanwhile, had said good-bye to Farmer Royd and the others at the gate of Windy Farm, and had set out to cover the three cold miles that lay between himself and Lostwithens. And he was thinking, with an unwonted lightening of the heart, that a woman was waiting there to give him greeting.

All hearts on Ling Crag Moor were turning, so it seemed, to-night toward the need of warmth and tenderness; but the blue moon rode untroubled, and the white lands lay asleep, and nature seemed aloof from human follies.

CHAPTER IX

A WILD NIGHT'S TALE

A WEEK had gone since Ephraim Shackleton had buried one wife and found another on the selfsame day; and in the little hut at Lostwithens sat Griff and his guest, one on either side the hearth. More than once during these past days he had feared the worst, and even Hester, coming daily to perform the needful offices, had forgotten her jealousy when she saw the stranger's weakness. At times she seemed to find heart again; then she would remember her child, lying yonder under the white snow, and she would fret, and all her weakness would return.

To-night, however, she had risen and dressed herself while Griff was foddering the cows; and now they were seated, she in the one chair that Griff possessed, and he upon the thick stump of oak which served so many purposes. They had lit no candles, but the fire was banked with peats and wood, and the red of it was warm and bright in every corner of the hut. The heath outside was deep as ever in its bondage to the snow, but the wind was rising fast, and a little sob ran in its wake, telling of thaw to come.

The woman's face was pale yet, and her hands lay listless in her lap; but her voice, low, firm, and sweet, had a note of content in it whenever she forgot to dream and found some word to say. For a long while, though, neither had broken the silence; each looked into the peats and saw fire-faces there.

On the sudden, moved by some wayward impulse, she lifted her eyes from the fire and watched Griff's face. There were lines of suffering to be read there, lines of toil, of sombre strength; in vain she searched for any trace of the tenderness which he had shown her in her hours of greatest weakness. Looking at him now, and piecing together the scattered hints of the past week, she understood dimly that this rough-hewn giant had fashioned his life deliberately, to the exclusion of softer feelings. When folk were sick, she told herself, he was ready to nurse them back to strength; but, soon as they grew stronger, it was their business to follow their own work in life, without aid of another's gentleness or sympathy.

She sighed, a quick, impatient sigh; he would grow still harder—yes, surely he would grow harder—when the last of her weakness had been overcome. Well, what did it matter, after all? When she was well again, she would have to leave this friendly hut, and his hardness need trouble her no more. Yet again she sighed impatiently; and at that moment Griff's face lost its sternness altogether, and a smile played about his lips.

"Your thoughts are long ones," she said quietly.

He roused himself with a start. "Ay, longer than the length of Ling Crag Moor," he laughed.

"And sadder than the moor, if that be possible. Yet the last thought of all seemed pleasant."

"It was," he said, with a steady glance at her. "I was thinking of a long-dead hunting day, when I galloped with old Squire Daneholme's niece and won the brush for her."

Their eyes met, and in the woman's a look of wonderment was growing.

"I have altered more than you, it seems," said Griff, "or may be you forgot that day as soon as it was over."

"I did not forget it," she said slowly, still watching

him, as if to piece the altered features into a remembered likeness. "But you were a boy then, and I a girl, and —and you have changed so much."

He laughed again, soberly. "Do you know that you set my heart on fire that day? There was the hunt—I love a woman who can take her fences as they come —and there was the long ride home, with a moon just peeping in and out among the clouds—and you never guessed what I was thinking all the way."

"Perhaps I did," she murmured. "Even girls are not slow to read an open book."

She knew him now, and in a flash that far-off scene returned. Like Hester Royd, she had looked always at the big men, and Griff even as a boy of twenty had shown promise of the breadth and strength that had afterwards grown equal to his height. Yes, she remembered all, for the day had had its glamour for her, too; it had been one of those holidays which we steal now and then from life, when truant lad meets truant lass and each makes for the other a fairyland whose memory abides. She recalled the last stiff fence, the soaring leap, the gallop that swept them into the Babel of the death-scene; she recalled the delicate, soft glory of the moon as it showed among the slender branches of the larch or flooded the rust-coloured sweeps of bracken that bounded their homeward way; she recalled, last of all, most clearly of all, how he had been loth to say good-bye, and how her hand had trembled in his own at parting.

"How strange it seems," she murmured, thinking of the years between and of the tragedy which had brought them once again together, here in the lonely waste that had no ear—or seemed to have none—for youthful glamour done with long ago.

"Ay, it is strange," said Griff, with that laugh which was always acquiescent, never mirthful. "It came and it went, that day; and now there's no trick of moonlight could make us boy and girl again. There is

this instead," he added, pointing to the window that looked out upon his intake.

The gesture was familiar to her already; it told her that, although his body might chance to rest between four walls, his mind and heart dwelt always under the wide sky that roofed the heath.

"Does glamour die when we are men and women?" she said, like a child asking a question of some wise elder. "Ought it not to be greater, deeper, after we have learned our lesson?"

"Yes, but it wants stronger food. Sweat, and toil, and the smell of the wind in your nostrils, will bring the glamour back—and then a hand creeps into yours, and a voice comes down the wind, and you know that Nature is your lover."

The man was not looking at her now. He had the far gaze of the mystic, and his tones were deep and fervid as of one who knew; he had forgotten already that it was this woman who, for the first time in his years of toil, had tempted him to put his hidden poetry into speech. But the woman shivered; as well seek human comfort from shaggy Bouldsworth Hill as from this man who had once been a glamour-ridden boy. Yet her heart cried out for comfort, and she was glad to know that he and she were not strangers, after all, but friends long parted.

Again there was a silence, broken by the wailing of the wind down the rude chimney-place. Again the woman shivered, leaning forward with wide eyes as if she were looking into some place of ghosts.

"It blows for a thaw," said Griff, returning from his dreams. "It will be good to see the bare fields again."

"Just so it blew the night he died," she murmured, not heeding him. "Just so—ah, God, how clearly all comes back! The crying wind—the crying child—*his* drunken step upon the stair."

"Cannot you forget?" said Griff. "You are weak yet, and—"

"I am weak, and so must find a listener," she broke in, with a passionate movement of the hands. "Women are not like men at all; it hurts us to keep our troubles in; confession eases us, and you—you will listen patiently?"

He nodded gravely, and snatched a bit of lighted wood from the fire, and lit his pipe afresh.

"I quarrelled with my uncle, as I told you," she went on, "and we were bitter, both of us. He had trained me to be a fighter—they are his own words, repeated often—and I was true to my upbringing. Yet we loved each other; I love him now; I know that, underneath his stubbornness and pride, he will always keep his love for me. But, after I had grown up, he wished to order my life for me; he would have me marry as he willed, or not at all; and *I* chose to love a man of whom he disapproved."

She halted a moment, listening to the wind; then went forward quietly with her tale.

"Uncle was right when he told me the man was a spendthrift and a libertine; but I thought he was blinded by self-will, and the man was good to look upon, and I would not listen. Last of all, I ran away with him, and my uncle would never speak to me again."

"No, he would not," murmured Griff. "That was the way of the man."

She smiled pitifully. "What was the answer, do you think, to the letters I wrote to him asking for forgiveness? Just, 'Go your own way to hell,'—not a word more nor less."

"I can see him writing it," put in the other. He was looking straight before him, and only these quiet interruptions showed that he was an attentive listener.

"Then the dark days began for me," she went on. "My husband owned a house not far from Wyecollar, and it was there we settled after our short honeymoon. Hark!" she broke off, as the wind rose once again,

with a curious, wild cry that seemed half human, half elfin.

Griff too had heard it, and the full-fed superstitions of the moor rolled in on him. "It is the Hunting Squire," he said—simply, as one who tells a commonplace. "It is a year since last I heard him riding by."

"We heard much of the Hunting Squire at Wyecollar, and my husband seems to have been of the same roystering breed. Ay, and his crimes were equal, and likely they hunt together now, the one ghost vying with the other as they spur the wind."

"You are bitter," was all Griff said.

"I have cause to be, for I learned to hate my husband," she went on, in the same quiet voice. "He hunted all through the winter's days, and drank half through the winter's nights; yes, he would have been a boon companion for the Hunting Squire. Oh, believe me, women only like these roysterers so long as they do not come too near; seen close at hand, they turn us sick."

She had been talking rather to herself than to Griff, and now she looked at him with sudden shame.

"All this must weary you," she said; "but I owe you some explanation of what brought me to your hut."

"Tell me all," Griff answered, "and then forget the tale. Give it to me to keep."

Instinctively she welcomed the woman's way of peace; instinctively she knew that this man could never again be a stranger to her, but rather a friend who knew and understood the byways of her life. The wind, moreover, howling round this firelit sanctuary, prompted her to seek a comrade.

"Perhaps you cannot guess how unclean and terrible those days were to me," she went on. "He had married me for a passionate whim—and passion cooled—and after it came cruelty. He began to—to strike me, whenever my will crossed his own. He chose the company

of his dogs, his horses, his drunken friends, in preference to mine. When the child came, I thought that it would soften him, but it did not; whenever it cried he threatened to kill it outright, so that the house might be at peace again. At peace! When it was his supper-parties, with their wine and oaths and brawls, that kept the child awake o' nights."

"Go on to the end," said Griff, when she halted in her tale. "You must not stay to brood over these old troubles. Give them to me; I promise you they'll be locked safely up."

The thought was kindly, and she gave him a quick glance of gratitude; but he was still looking straight before him, watching the smoke curl upward from his pipe.

"At last there came a night like this," she went on, "a night of thaw, following long days of snow. He had been weather-bound, and so, instead of hunting through the day, he drank and diced with his boon comrades, till at last he must have been beside himself. Oh, he was mad! No sane man could so have played the brute. Listen; it was gloaming-tide, and the wind sobbed round the gables—just such a Hunter's Wind as this—and I heard the hall door open and my husband stagger in. The child—I was nursing it—heard his footsteps, too, and began to cry; for he had learned to hate his father, as I had done."

Another silence. She seemed to see a picture, horrible and well defined, before her eyes.

"He called me savagely by name," she recommenced, in a hushed voice, "and I ran half down the stair, the child still in my arms. His eyes were bloodshot, and his face was terrible to see.

"'Stifle the brat!' he cried. 'He drives me mad.'

"I ran back to take the child into safety, but he was up the stair almost before I could turn.

"'Give it to me, if you're squeamish about the work,' he said, and put out his arms to take it.

"And then—just as I was thinking that he would snatch the child—his hands dropped to his side, and his face went purple, and there was naked horror in his eyes; without a word he clutched at the stair-rail, missed it, and fell backward into the hall. When I went to him I found him dead, with his skull battered in against the carved end of the banister."

Griff said nothing, for there was nothing to be said. He only waited until she could return from this dead past that had her in its grip. The wind, falling to a lonesome whine, was sad as the tale which it had set to music; it was as if the Ghostly Rider and the Ghostly Hounds were weary of this phantom chase and found themselves benighted far from home.

The woman lost her quietness. "I was glad!" she cried, the old Daneholme spirit leaping out. "He was dead at my feet, and I was glad. Was it a time for make-believe? He had killed my heart, he would have killed the child; and now he had killed himself, and I was glad."

Trash, perplexed by the passion in her voice, grew excited in his turn, and came and looked at her, his brown eyes shining sympathetic underneath their thatch of hair. She took his head on her knee and patted him, and watched the peats crumble into ruddy dust.

"The lawyers told me," she went on by and by, "that he had gambled away his fortune and my own. The very house, the furniture, everything was mortgaged. I was friendless and penniless. For the child's sake I hid my pride, and went to his own people, who were godly folk, and richer than he had ever been. I begged for a home with them until I could find some means of earning bread. They took me in grudgingly, and every day they let me understand that I was a pauper—I, a Daneholme! I conquered my pride again and wrote to uncle; he would not answer; and day by day it grew more difficult to live with the people who had given me a refuge."

Still Griff watched the fire; he had moved only once, and that was to replenish the dwindling heap of wood and peats; but the woman understood his silence.

"Little by little they made me realise that, in their eyes, I was answerable for their son's misdoing. Before he married me, so it was hinted, he had been sober, upright, everything that was reputable; and I did not laugh in their faces, for I was dependent on them, though I had known for months that, even when he married me, he had the most evil reputation of any man about the moorside."

Griff looked up suddenly. "I know his name," he said. "And you—*you*—were married to him? Why, he was known—"

"You need not hesitate," she put in bitterly. "He was known far and wide for what he was. But his name must never pass between us; he is dead, and I am trying to kill his memory. Shall I tell you something? While I have been lying here, thinking, thinking, I have been glad just once or twice that the boy has not lived; he might have grown to be such as his father was, and the grave out yonder is a better fate."

"And these folk to whom you went?" asked Griff, striving constantly to keep her thoughts from that child's grave which he himself had dug.

"They were as cruel as he had been, in another way. They were so godly, do you understand, that they had lost humanity, so godly that they counted everything a sin and forgave no slightest stumbling by the way. Their own son had erred, and they must make me his temptress; I was the scapegoat ready to their hand. Time after time I told myself that I could bear it no longer; but there was the child to think of, and what single thing could I do to earn a livelihood?"

"It was their duty to provide for you. *He* had gambled away your money; were they too godly to repay it?"

"They loved money too well to part with it for such

light scruples. It pleased them to have me at their mercy, to thwart me at every turn, to keep me constantly informed that I was suffering now for all my past worldliness. Indeed, there must be madness in the whole family; they could not have been so cruel otherwise. My husband had not scrupled to use hand or whip, but they were worse, if anything; they seemed to delight in inventing fresh accusations against me. And at last the end came. In a fit of passion his mother accused me in so many words of having caused his death. I had thrown him down the stair, she said, and— I laughed then, and took the child up, and went out into the snow. Better for both of us to die than to live in such a home."

"Poor bairn!" he muttered. "Poor bairn, indeed, if you had to flee from something colder than the snow I found you in the other night."

"They were colder by far—so cold that heart and brain were numbed by contact with them. I cannot tell you what the life had meant to me; it had made even the snow and the lonely moor seem warm and friendly."

"And you set off without a thought of the end—of what awaited you among the snowdrifts?"

"I thought it would be death," she said simply. "It seemed better so. And then the cold, fresh wind aroused me. I was strong, and the desire to live awakened. I thought of the child, and for his sake I could not die. Then I remembered a sister of my mother's, who lived near Halifax; there was no goodwill between us, but surely for the family's sake she would give me a home for a while. I did not guess how deep the snow was, but thought I could find my way across the moor to Marshcotes and get a coach there."

"Oh, you were foolish, foolish! Men skilled in every bypath of the moor could scarcely find their way in such a snow."

"I was mad, I think, with ill-treatment and injustice. At any rate, I tried it; and I grew tired—the child was

heavy—and by and by a strange drowsiness came over me. I fought against it, but it conquered me, and at the last I had just strength to creep under cover of some rocks and shelter the child with my own body."

She broke down suddenly, and Griff, uneasy though he was at all times to see a woman's tears, was glad of the relief it brought her.

"The boy was taken, and I was left—to what end?" she asked with sudden vehemence.

"God knows," the other answered gravely; "but to some purpose, since it fell out so."

"Ah, you have faith," she put in bitterly, "while I have none."

"Only faith that has seen seed planted and good crops follow. There's no place for chance in this life." He talked with that odd, selfless calm which sometimes angered the woman, yet at other times gave her a sense that she was leaning on the solid rock.

"There is no purpose," she said. Then with another quick change of mood, "There must be, oh, there must be! Tell me, you have worked, and suffered, and been patient, have you not?"

"I have worked; it was my only chance."

"See you," she cried, "I have always longed to be with men who worked. The men of my world—uncle, my husband, all of them—they were fearless riders, they could endure hardship of any sort for the sake of sport, but their lives seemed useless, thrown away. It maddened me sometimes to think of it; I wanted to know a man who could work for some great object, could work in loneliness and pain, just for the sake of the work itself."

"Yet when we rode together long ago," Griff interrupted, with a smile, "you seemed to care for such things as fearless riding."

"I care for them yet. Men should do such things, and do them well—but they must do more.—You?" she broke off, leaning forward eagerly. "What

is this life of yours that seems to have made you some thing like a man?"

"You would scarcely care to know what the life is; there's no greatness of any sort in it—just to fight with the heath, and make good land out of barren."

"It must be dreary labour," she said, returning to the woman's outlook once again.

"Not dreary! It is labour of a sort that enthrals and strengthens. I was sick when I came to this bit of moor, and it healed me.—Now, child, you are weak yet, and you shall talk no more until I have given you supper."

Trash had yesterday brought in another hare, which Griff had cooked, and which now was simmering in the pot. He did the best he could to set a dainty plateful before the sick woman, but she would not touch it at the first.

"A little milk is all I want," she said. "Oh, if you knew how I shrink from the mere sight of food."

"A sure sign that you'd be better for it. See, I have taken pains with this, just because I knew you needed it."

And so, partly because she wished to please him, partly because she knew that his will was stronger than her own, she ate a mouthful. To her surprise, the taste was pleasant. Her hunger was apparent now; she passed her plate for more.

Trash came to her side, deserting his master for a while, and she fed him with the choicest morsels.

"Well, then, you saved me, did you not?" she said, with one hand on his rough, mud-coloured coat.

"He has saved me, too, time and time," said Griff, "when I needed company and would not go in search of it."

The woman glanced at him, but made no answer; again she was wondering what story lay behind the splendid isolation of this man. In his own good time he would tell her, may be, just as she had told him her own tale.

"Hark to the wind!" she murmured, with a quick shudder.

"Ay, we shall have rain before the dawn.—Now, child, I will go and see what the night is like; and you have stayed up long enough. It will never do to have you ill again."

He opened the hut door, letting in a gust of warmer wind than Ling Crag Moor had known these three months past. The sky was swept clean of clouds, and above him, as he climbed the steep, the great stars wheeled and twinkled. So clear the night was that he could see the dim outlines of the hills, could see the frozen topmost layers of the snow go whistling down the wind. There was no thaw as yet; but while he stood there, drinking in deep draughts of the sweet air, he saw a bank of cloud come up and over from the dark line of the western moor—saw it creep forward till Charley's Wain, that had shone white and clear, was hidden, till the Milky Way—a wide road paved with star-dust, so it seemed—was dimmed. And ever the wind blew more shrilly, and ever, at oft-recurring intervals, the Ghostly Rider blew his horn in the wake of his filmy pack.

Griff's one thought now was work. For three months the moor had lain under the grip of frost, or snow, or both together. He had found no work ready to his hands, except the tending of his beasts, the making good of such repairs in mistal or in stable as were needful; and he had hungered to use pick and spade once more.

"In a week's time—less, may be—the land will be waiting for me," he said.

The woman was forgotten. Many waifs and strays—flotsam and jetsam from the wild life of the moors—had sought his hospitality; she was another guest—no more, no less.

The sky was deep in clouds from edge to edge by this time, and a light mist of rain was coming down the wind.

Griff turned and went back to his hut. His guest had obeyed him, and was lying, with wide-open eyes, watching the flickering peat-glow on the walls. A softer light came into her face as the door opened, and she saw its frame-way filled entirely by this man with the raindrops on his face and the snow on his thick boots. Yet Griff, as he nodded cheerily, saw that there were tears on her cheeks and tears yet waiting to be shed.

"What is it, lassie?" he asked, leaning against the wall and looking down at her.

"Nothing—oh, it is nothing—but I heard the wind, and I thought of the child who is lying out there.—See now, I am brave again. You will not try to keep awake to-night? I am nearly well again, and I shall want for nothing."

"I shall be here if you need me, and so will Trash," the other answered cheerily.—"Why, lad, what is it?" he broke off, as the dog got to his feet and began to bark and whine.

There came a sound of footsteps on the snow, and then a quick, impatient knock, and Trash was shivering with anger and distrust that a visitor should come at this late hour to Lostwithens.

"Quiet, lad, quiet!" said Griff, as he opened the hut door.

The firelight shone full on the face of Gabriel Hirst, the preacher; and Griff, with an instinctive sense of the business that had brought his friend here to-night, pulled to the door behind him and went out into the drizzling thaw-rain.

"Well, Gabriel!" he said. "You're welcome at all times, but you choose a stormy night."

The preacher's voice was sombre. "I choose no weather, lad; the days are given us, and to each day its duty."

They stood there, facing each other in awkward silence; then Gabriel lifted the lantern which he carried and looked searchingly at Lomax.

"What of the woman you rescued, Griff?" he asked. "Is she still with you?"

"Yes, for she is too weak to leave shelter yet."

"And you stay here with her?" he went on, a prophet's stern denunciation in his voice.

"Would you have me leave her lonely in the midst of Ling Crag Moor? Would you have me turn her out to die?"

"Better death of the carnal body than of the soul. Better to perish in the flesh than live to sin in soul and body. Think of the eternal torment, lad—hearken to the crackling of the flames and the bitter crying of the damned—the damned, who would not see the truth."

The two men were strong, each in his own way, and now they fronted each other like well-matched adversaries.

"Gabriel Hirst," said Griff, "we quarrelled once, and we learned our lesson. For friendship's sake you may say what you will to-night; but I shall listen to no second gospel of this sort from you."

"Women were your pitfall always, lad; I came, out of the fulness of spiritual conflict, to warn your feet from the snare."

Griff laughed soberly. "Women are rocks and peat and ling to me now, as I said when once you came on a like errand. I tell you, this waif is no more to me than if I had found a child amongst the snow."

"She will grow dearer, and what then?"

"Then you shall come to me, Gabriel, and we will talk it over all afresh."

"And what of your neighbours, lad? Will they not find a stumbling-block in this?"

"I live too far from them to hear their talk, or heed it. That is my last word, Gabriel—but I thank you for the friendliness that brought you here."

"Is she fair to look upon?" persisted Gabriel, with his quaint, half-biblical turn of phrase.

Griff looked at him, surprised. "Yes—but I had scarcely thought about it," he said, with such manifest

sincerity that the preacher's fears were quieted, though only for the moment.

"I doubt, I doubt!" he muttered, as if wrestling in prayer. "Two and two is God's ordinance for men—they must one day come together, living as they do—and they will come without the sanction of religion. Griff lad, be warned!" he broke off, fiercely, impetuously. "Your heart is cold, you think, and I tell you it is hot as the hell that yawns for us. You can tread down the old, rebellious Adam, and think him dead; and when you least look for it—see, there's a woman smiling at you, and you leap toward the Pit."

Dramatic always, quick to see pictures in the air, Gabriel was pointing out across the grey, lack-lustre snow; the Pit yawned there before his eyes, and he could see the temptress wantoning down the primrose road. But Griff was thinking of the delicate, proud woman who shared his hut, and the allegory came all amiss.

"And if she's a good woman, Gabriel, what then?"

The preacher thought of his own wife, and softened.

"You could always talk me down, lad," he said, a line of perplexity between his brows. "Yet, for all that, I doubt your safety. There's no woman but is tender once the spark is rightly struck."

Again they were silent for a while; then Griff slipped his arm within the other's, and changed the topic with intentional abruptness. "I should like to offer you bite and sup, Gabriel, after your long tramp; but I cannot well ask you indoors just now."

"No matter, lad, for I have work to do across the moor. Phineas Feather's girl has gone the way of Belial, and she repents, and I must snatch her soul while yet there's time. A good lass she was, Griff, and a prayerful, until she met the Enemy by the way—and this it was which set my thoughts on you, and made me come two miles out of my way to bring my message to you."

"Gabriel, there's my intake yonder," said Griff, pointing into the darkness as if he, too, saw a picture framed by night. "Do you think I have worked here all these years, glad of my loneliness, for nothing? Do you think I can have kept the least sense of—of follies between man and woman? No, Gabriel, lad; I buried my wife, and there was an end; for I love her dead far better than I could love another woman living. Good-bye, old friend, and give your prayers to men in real trouble."

Still the preacher halted. "You think you stand firm; take heed lest you fall," he pleaded. "My heart is sore, Griff; there are so many souls being lost.—You are friendly with Hester Royd?" he broke off, with seeming irrelevance.

"So friendly that you warned me also against her," laughed Griff.

"A worse fate is coming to the lass. They tell me that Ned o' Bracken Clough has been seen more than once with her; and you know Ned's way with a woman."

"I know that Ned and I were jolly comrades once. He may be wildish, but a better rascal never stepped the moor, Gabriel. Why should not he and Hester set up house together?"

"Because Ned o' Bracken Clough will never set up house, except among the bracken, and at wall-corners where the hares come through, and down by quiet pools where trout are to be tickled. He was born a fly-by-night, and he will die one; and ill days are coming for Hester's father, who has deserved better things."

"Gabriel," said the other quietly, "what is amiss between you and Hester? You judge her harshly, and I have thought, just now and then, that you had some quarrel with her?"

"As a man, I have no quarrel with her; as a preacher, I was once moved to wrath—to righteous wrath. The girl is as heathen as if the Light had never come to Ling Crag moorside."

"Well, so am I, for that matter. She's a good lass,

Gabriel, and you must look at the brighter side of things. How will you get to Phineas Feather's to-night?" he broke off, not anxious to pursue the topic of Hester Royd. "It's an ill way to find, and the last time you were here I had to guide you over the moor."

"The drifts are frozen now, and there's a cart-track a mile to the east of here which I can find. Besides, I have to go, just as I had to come to you, and duty makes its own clear road, lad."

"Well, good-night again, Gabriel. Keep your lantern alight, at anyrate; faith and common sense need have no quarrel, eh?"

He turned and went indoors again. His guest was dozing, but she half awakened at the sound of the closing door.

"Your visitor came late," she said. "Did he bring bad news of any sort?"

"Yes," Griff answered drily—"that my soul was in jeopardy. It was Gabriel Hirst, the preacher whom I mentioned to you. Poor lad! He seldom rests for thinking of souls that must find their own way of peace, after all, not his."

She smiled—one of those sad, humorous smiles which seemed to give fresh meaning to her beauty.

"Are we not safe even here?" she said. "They have talked so much of souls, and cared so little for one's heart, these people I have lived with lately."

"You shall be safe here," Griff answered, with a glance of that fellowship which understands.

They talked a while, and Griff looked at his visitor with a new, faint interest. Almost for the first time he realised that eyes, and face, and russet-brown, rich hair, all made for beauty of a rare and winning sort; but he realised it as men realise the beauty of a picture, and he saw it with critical, unhuman eyes. As for the preacher's warning, he had already half forgotten it, treating it as the fantastic dream of one who dealt too much in dreams.

The woman saw his scrutiny and the coldness of it, and she felt chill and lonely as she had done that snow-bound night at Wynyates Kirk; and when at last she slept, it was to dream of the Hunting Squire, who swung her to his saddle and carried her across the endless leagues of snow.

Only the moor was wakeful. Wide, white, and wet it lay, listening to the wind and wondering when the treasure-houses of the spring would be unlocked. So much this moor had to unfold—green of grass, grey of the silvery bents, purple of the summer ling; and, like a human mother, she yearned to have her younglings at her breast. Yet even the moor took heart; it was warm beneath the sheltering snow, and green things already were pushing through the peat; the rains had come, and, when the earth could look once more into the open, sunlit face of heaven, all would be well with the children of the heath. In face of the moor's vastness, the moor's hopes of motherhood, it should have seemed a little thing that two wayfaring folk were travelling on the road of destiny; yet the wind, for all that — the wind, who is the gossip and soothsayer of the heath—centred itself to-night upon Griff's hut; he and the woman who had claimed his help were the themes of every gust and eddy that knocked at the walls, or scrambled down the chimney, or rattled at the door-sneck as if to ask for entry.

And the wind, shrewd foreteller of the things to come, was right. Lostwithens, the sanctuary reared by one strong man against the frets and passions of the outer world, was sanctuary no longer; a woman had come into its life, and fate sat brooding on the snow-deep thatch of ling which roofed the hut.

CHAPTER X

THE COMING OF NED O'BRACKEN CLOUGH

It was nearing candle-time when Hester reached the hut on the next day. Griff had been cleaning out the mistals, and met her as she came down the rise that guarded Lostwithens from the moor. The snow, white yesterday, was yellowing beneath the rain, as a moorland pool will yellow after they have dipped the sheep in it. The even surface of the moor was pitted now with hollows, big and little, filled with rain.

"Why, Hester, I had given you up for to-day!" he cried.

"Father wanted me. The roan cow is ailing, and he thinks she'll scarcely live."

"What, the bonnie roan he bought at Skipton Fair? She was worth two of any beast at Windy Farm."

Hester tossed her head with impatient irony. A woman might be hungering for a word of love, and Griff would never guess it; but, give him a sick cow, an ailing horse, a sheep with foot-rot, and he was full of instant sympathy.

"What ails her?" he asked, not noticing her silence.

"Milk-fever, and bad at that."

"I'll walk back with you," he said at once. "Perhaps between us we can save her, Farmer Royd and I."

"As you please," answered Hester indifferently. "How is *she* to-day?"

"Stronger, I think. She talks of going out, but I will not let her."

"I don't see that she ails aught. She's weakly-like, of course, but you can cosset her too much."

Griff watched her go indoors, then turned into the stable, and, more for lack of occupation than for any real need, he busied himself with the grooming of his horses. It was here that Hester found him, a half-hour later. Trash was close at her heels; for, like all healthy dogs, he welcomed health and vigour in his human friends, and Hester Royd had a generous supply of both.

"I never saw such coats on Ling Crag moorside," said the girl, stroking first the slim mare's neck, and then the big, wise head of the chestnut who had rested many months from ploughing.

"I've been idle, owing to the frost," laughed Griff, "and perhaps I groom them twice as often as they need it."

"Well, they don't shame you. Father's right, I'm thinking, when he says you love a horse as other men love frolic. Not that you'd find much in the way of frolic on Ling Crag Moor, even if you wanted it."

Griff laid aside his brushes and put on his coat in readiness to start for Windy Farm. "I used to find plenty," he said; "and Ned o' Bracken Clough finds plenty to this day, unless they wrong him."

For a moment she was silent, her big eyes blazing into his. "What do you know of Ned?" she asked, with a passion Griff could not understand. "What sort of frolic does he find on the moor?"

He remembered the preacher's words last night, and wondered if there had been some truth in them.

"Oh, hares, and moonlight jaunts, and fights with old Squire Daneholme's keepers," he answered lightly.

"He's welcome to them. Ned would die if he hadn't something to poach or somebody to fight. He can fight well, too, for I saw him once. I wonder—"

"What do you wonder?" asked Griff, as he put out the lantern and held the stable door until Hester had passed out into the wailing, windy rain.

"Why, you and Ned are the biggest on the moorside. I was wondering which would win if it came to an outright tussle."

"Ned would have it, I fancy, though we're not likely to put it to the test."

"And I fancy you would have it; but there's never no telling, and it's time we started. Sakes! I never came through such slush as lies 'twixt this and Windy Farm."

Her tone was querulous. How close Griff was to her in the rainy darkness, and how her heart was aching for him, and yet how sure she was that he would never in this life be near to her at all! Undisciplined in heart, though God knew she had had discipline enough of the kind taught by upland farm-work, the girl was honest to the core—honest with herself, no less than with her neighbours. Quick as her pride was in some ways, it helped her not at all when Griff was in question. She knew her love for him; she would have told him of it, had he shown the least, faint glimmer of that mother-wit which seemed asleep in him. And for this reason her voice was querulous, as the sea's voice is when it beats and breaks itself upon the rockbound shore.

"Hester," he said, coming to a halt when they had crossed half the mistal yard, "I may have to spend the night at Windy Farm, and we cannot leave the little woman yonder all alone. Will you stay here, and I will tell your father? If the roan needs watching all the night, I will do my best for her."

"Ay, you would," said Hester drily. "Well, I'll stay."

Trash plainly wished to go abroad with his master, but Griff would not let him, though the beast pleaded wistfully.

"Best keep him with you, Hester, to scare the thieves away," he said, laughing at the notion that any thief would care to overhaul Lostwithens. "Tell her why I have to go to Windy Farm."

"Oh, ay, I'll tell her," assented Hester, still in the same dry tone.

She watched Griff disappear into the shadows, then knocked at the hut door and went indoors. There was fierce resentment in her heart against the stranger-woman; yet this died down as she saw how weary the other looked, as she marked the sadness of her eyes. And what did it matter, after all, that she was here? Griff was no mate for a farmyard lass whose hands were reddened by rough work. And yet—and yet—she could live, thought Hester—she could live, if only he would keep as aloof from other women as from herself!

The stranger was amazed when she heard what errand had taken Griff across the moors.

"I do not understand," she said, with a little helpless movement of the hands, as if she were in presence of a bigger life that crushed her. "You say he is crossing miles and miles of snow because a cow is ailing?"

"'Tis only three miles; we think little of that up here. Besides, Mr. Lomax is queer about dumb things—queerer than father is, and that's saying a deal. He might walk on four feet himself, he gets that sorry when a beast falls sick.—And now, I'm to give you your supper, so he said, though it's full early to my thinking."

The stranger made a fair pretence of eating, and afterwards she sat beside the hearth and talked with Hester. The life of these dwellers in the wilderness was so new to her, so strange; for, though she had known the moor-folk well, as she had thought in the old days, her acquaintance with them had been always a guest's acquaintance, striking no deeper than the outer crust; she had learned little of those inner ways of thought and feeling, of hope and dread and misery and happiness, which went to the making of their wind-tossed lives. Question after question she asked, quietly, timidly almost; and Hester, glad of the unwonted chance of gossip, chattered on of the life which to her was commonplace, which to her companion was new and strange as

some lonely island of the seas might be to a traveller wrecked upon its coasts.

At last, however, Hester saw that her patient had grown feverish again; the colour came too quickly into the tired face, the eyes were over bright. She suggested that the other should undress and lie down between the blankets.

"Mr. Lomax will be late, if he comes at all to-night," she said; "but I promised him to sleep here, as I told you, if he was kept at the farm."

"You are all very kind to me; I am a burden to you—"

"There! It's a hard life and a lonely one up on Ling Crag Moor," Hester interrupted with real kindliness. "We couldn't get on at all if we didn't help each other now and again. Do you think we grudge a bit of trouble, Mistress—"

She halted, as if waiting for the name, and the other, with a faint gesture of repugnance, gave it.

"Nethercliff," she put in quietly. None but she knew what the effort was to speak her husband's name—the name which recalled nothing but a month's idolatry, and after that the hellish years of drink and dice and cruelty.

Hester set her hands upon her shapely hips, a trick of hers when surprised or deeply moved.

"What? You're mad Harry Nethercliff's widow?" she cried, with blunt betrayal of her feelings. "To be sure, he married a Daneholme—I might have pieced two and two together before now."

The red spots deepened in the sick woman's cheeks; Hester was hurting her cruelly, though she did not know it.

"I know a deal about him, you see," went on the girl; "we all do in Ling Crag, for he used to come galloping like mad to the Eagle, and sit among the lads who were drinking there, and 'tice them to go out seeking devilry—poaching, cock-fighting, aught that came into

his crazy head.—There! I'm a fool to let my tongue run on so, and you look as if you were afire, like. It's time you were abed."

She looked through the window of the hut, and saw that Charley's Wain—a sure timepiece for those who understood star-lore—pointed to ten of the clock at least. The clouds had retreated for a while, and all the sky was full of stars, and only the sobbing wind remained to tell them of the thaw.

"Why, it's late, and there'll be things said if I let you sit up a minute longer," cried the girl.

The other, glad of a change of topic, was turning to obey when there came from without a sound of heavy feet, moving fast through the slushy snow. In another moment the door was burst open, and Ned o' Bracken Clough stood within the room. He was splashed from heel to shoulder; grey crusts of snow, half melted, clung to his corduroys; the sweat poured down like rain from his forehead, and his face, usually so full of indolent content, was knotted with harsh twists and curves.

The sick woman, feverish already, could not keep back a cry at sight of him. At the first glance he seemed murderous, and her one thought was that he had come to rob. To rob! She had no time to remember that in the hut here no thief, with the best will in the world, could ply a paying trade.

"We have the dog, at any rate," was her second thought.

But Trash was strangely faithless; he had jumped up from the hearth, and was fawning on the new-comer and giving little whines of welcome.

"What, you, Ned?" cried Hester. "By the Heart, you might knock when you come to visit gentlefolk."

Ned glanced in wonderment at the two women. He forgot for the moment what was behind him; indeed, he stood between the deep sea and the devil, for one of these two was gently born, and he felt big and clumsy on the sudden, and wondered if it would not be easier

to face the men behind him than this dainty, frightened woman.

Mrs. Nethercliff, for her part, leaned against the wall, and watched the scene. If Hester knew this great, sweat-dripping man, if Trash knew him, he would surely do no harm. Yet she was at a loss altogether to account for the intrusion. Hester, on the other hand, was in need of no enlightenment.

"You told me you were going after game to-night," she said quietly. "Are they near, Ned?"

"Too near for my fancy, lass, and they saw me, I doubt, take down the moor-face to Lostwithens here."

"Then we'll hide you. Quick, Ned! You're over big to be missed in a hut that's scarce high enough to hold you."

"That's true," said Ned, with a laugh that contrasted oddly with his haggard state.

Hester, cool as if she were making apple-pasties up at Windy Farm, opened the door of the shed where Griff kept his stack of peats.

"Creep in," she said. "I'll cover you."

He laughed again. This girl—who had captured his free-lance fancy long ago—showed coolness and resource such as he liked to see in man or woman. The peat-house was half full of fuel, and Ned scrambled somehow to the back, while Hester began to build the peats into a wall in front of him.

Mrs. Nethercliff, forgetting her alarm, watched eagerly while the work went forward; she had learned one lesson from the moor at least, and that was an instinctive friendliness toward the outcast or the fugitive, an instinctive enmity against the lawgivers.

"Quick, Hester, quick!" she cried more than once, though the girl's hands were moving swift and nimbly.

And then she smiled at her own eagerness, and, with a quiet wonder, understood that her past life was unsubstantial to her now, that these rough happenings at Lostwithens were real and understandable. Was

there witchcraft in the place, she asked herself? Once on a day she would not have set her whole heart on rescuing a red-headed giant whose talent was for poaching.

Hester had barely finished building her wall of peats before the sound of voices came from the front of the hut.

"He's here. A guinea to nothing he's here!" cried a big, blustering voice. "In you go, lads, and I promise you he'll get a broken head if he tries to pass me at the door."

Mrs. Nethercliff leaned back against the wall; her face was colourless, and one hand clutched idly at her heart. Two years had passed since she had last heard that voice—bitter years, which the voice brought back to her. What in God's name was *he* doing here to-night?

"Yond's Squire Daneholme," said Hester. "He's a voice like a bull's when he's roused, and, once you've heard it, you're not like to forget it."

"Yes, it's uncle," murmured the other, in a dazed, helpless way.

The keepers, meanwhile, had knocked twice, and now, having gained no answer, they flung open the door and entered. There were five of them in all, and the face of each showed like to Ned's; for the race had been long, and the hardship of it had twisted their honest features to the likeness of wild beasts.

They fell back, just as Ned had done, on seeing the two women.

"Well?" said Hester, standing straight and disdainful, her hands upon her hips.

"We—we're seeking Ned o' Bracken Clough," stammered the foremost of the men.

"What's that to us? Do you fancy two lonely women are going to help you chase him?"

"Nay, nay—but—well, it's this way, you see—we saw him take down the slope, and we saw the hut door open and the light come through; and then it shut again."

"Very like," said Hester tranquilly. "May be you know Mr. Lomax?"

"Used to," grinned one of the keepers. "I was laid in bed for six weeks once after a bit of a fratching-do with Mr. Lomax."

"Well, this is his hut; he left it a while since, for I brought him a message from Windy Farm, and he's gone to help father with an ailing beast."

"It's not him we want," growled the keeper who had first spoken.

"I'm not saying it is; but you saw the door open and shut, and the light come out. You saw a great figure of a man, I reckon, too; well, that was Mr. Lomax, on his way to Windy Farm."

Mrs. Nethercliff was keeping too anxious a watch upon the door—in dread lest the Squire should show himself—to heed much of what was being said; yet she understood vaguely that Hester, while keeping as near the truth as possible, was making out a clever case for her friend.

The keepers looked at each other. They remembered that Ned and Griff were almost the same height, and Hester's story, though in a less hurried moment it might have shown obvious defects, confused their wits.

"What in thunder are you doing?" came the Squire's voice. "Do you think old bones like mine want to spend the night on this damned moor?"

Mrs. Nethercliff had turned towards the hearth; and so, when the Squire pushed his way as far as the threshold and looked round the hut, he saw only a woman's figure, too small to be glanced at twice in presence of Hester's straight, commanding height.

"He's not here, Squire," answered one of the men. "There's not a corner where even a lad could hide."

"That's true," growled the Squire, peering round into every nook.

Then he glanced sharply at Hester, and it was at this moment that, woman-like, she forfeited all that she had

striven for. She had turned her head instinctively toward the door of the peat-house, and Squire Daneholme chuckled.

"Have a peep in there, you fools," he said, pointing to the door.

Hester let her hands fall from her hips. "This will mean three months for Ned," she murmured resignedly.

There was something assured and deep about this upland lass, despite the light to-and-froing of her whims. She had striven loyally to save her graceless Ned o' Bracken Clough; now that she had done her best and failed, she accepted the situation with a fatalism bred by wind and storm; assuredly, the three months of gaol would not lessen her regard for Ned.

The keepers, meanwhile, had pulled down the wall of peats, and one of them had brought a candle, which threw dim lights and shadows into the farther corners of the shed. It was empty.

"Bring him out," thundered the Squire. "Heels first or head first, bring him. I've long wanted a talk with Ned o' Bracken Clough."

"He's not here, Squire," muttered a keeper.

The Squire plucked a candle from the table, and held it so that the grease dripped down upon the red-brown peats, until he, too, was sure that the hut was empty of their quarry.

"The man's a weasel," roared Squire Daneholme. "Here, girl"—turning like the storm on Hester—"you know something of this business. And that other woman, who is she? What the devil are the two of you doing in this wind-ridden hole?"

Mrs. Nethercliff still kept her face to the hearth, and even in the midst of her trepidation she could not but see the humorous side of all this turmoil. As he had ever been, so was the old Squire now—gusty, careless of his speech, prone to hammer his way through life if life resisted him. It did not surprise her that, a moment later, his mood changed utterly.

"What we are doing here is none of your business, Squire Daneholme," Hester answered sturdily. "We know naught of Ned's whereabouts, and you'll have to answer for breaking into another man's house by night. Roar away, Squire! I've heard bulls before to-day, and they don't frighten me."

The old Squire slapped his leg—a trim leg yet, despite his years—and his whole face shone red and jolly on the sudden, as if the sun had overcome a thunderstorm.

"Gad, you're a rare plucked one!" he cried. "Roger Daneholme will have to answer to you, will he, you game little fighting-cock? Gad, that's good! Here, lads, who lives here, did you say?" he broke off, turning to the keepers.

"Mr. Lomax, Squire—young Lomax of Marshcotes Manor he used to be in his best days."

"Lomax, Lomax? I should know Lomax well. Lord, yes, he once gave me one right between the eyes, after the stiffest fight I ever had, and dropped me into a gorse bush. Asked him to dinner there and then—never met as jolly a lad. What the deuce is he doing here, when he's lord of Marshcotes Manor, with a trim house of his own?"

"They say he's fairy-kist," put in one of the keepers—shamefacedly, as if he believed the tale, yet feared the ridicule that his betters felt—or made pretence of feeling—for superstitions of all kinds.

The Squire glanced shrewdly from Hester to the woman whose back was turned to him with such persistency.

"Humph!" said he. "He's kissed by more than the fairies, to all appearance. Damme if I can understand this freak of his, but the Lomaxes were all as mad as March hares; so are the Daneholmes. Well, I shall ride over some day and see the lad. Never met a man who could drive in with his left like Lomax."

Mrs. Nethercliff stirred uneasily. Suppose her uncle should ride over soon—he was always quick to follow up

his whims—and should find her here before she was well enough to leave? Oh, at any cost, she must get away, to-morrow or the next day!

The Squire saw her start of dismay, and for a moment seemed inclined to cross to her. Then he turned away, with a shrug of the shoulders. What business was it of his that Griff chose to order his household on strange lines?

"Come, lads," he said. "We've lost our man this time, and we might as well make the best of it. Remember I've a few good miles to cover before I can find a bed in Marshcotes, and I'm not so young as I once was. Good-night, lass," this to Hester; "you're as bonnie a game-bird as a man need want to see. Curse Ned o' Bracken Clough for me when next you meet—for I've a shrewd notion that you meet him often."

Like the wind he had come; like the wind he had gone, taking his keepers with him.

"Where can Ned be?" asked Hester, after she had closed the door.

The other shook her head. She was not thinking of the fugitive, but of the bluff, hot-headed, kindly Squire, who had given her love and shelter in the buried days.

"Oh, to be able to return to him!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XI

THE HEALER

GRIFF trudged upward through the snow. Wet as the going was, the thaw had not struck deep as yet, and underneath the rainy surface the snow was still firm to the tread. He was not thinking of the discomfort, though, but of the roan cow which needed him.

"I've saved a few in my time," he murmured once; "yet Farmer Royd is older at the work than I."

He found Joshua Royd pacing up and down the kitchen of Windy Farm, finishing a slab of bread and butter which he held in both his hands.

"Why, Mr. Lomax, what brings you?" he cried, stopping with an air of gradual surprise. Slow in all his thoughts, slow and sure in all his movements, was Farmer Royd.

"Hester told me the roan was down with fever, so I came."

"Oh, ay, and you thought to cure her when Joshua Royd could not?" put in the other, with a queer flash of jealousy. "Well, well, I've heard more than once that you've the King's gift of healing, and it may be so."

"How is she?"

"Fair, fair. I've just given her a sweating, and a drop of gin and treacle."

It was curious, seeing the two of them so gravely discussing the roan's ailments, to note how close a likeness each bore to the other. Both had the look of men

who had foregathered more with four-legged than with human company; both wore the keen, yet gentle, look of a doctor who is doing his best in a critical case.

"Let's go and see her," said Griff.

"Ay, I only stepped in for a bite and sup; I was just going back when you came knocking at the door."

Joshua took up the lantern, standing ready lighted on the table, and together they crossed to the mistal. The cows were manifestly ill at ease, as if they knew that sickness was present in their midst, and they eyed the two men wistfully as they went by. In the farthest stall of all was the roan cow, lying helplessly among her straw.

"By the Heart, she's done for!" groaned Royd. "I never knew a cow get up again when once she's laid as flat as that with milk-fever. Nay, nay, and she was doing nicely when I left her a two-three minutes since!"

His grief was evident; for he loved his cows, and this one was his darling.

Griff was watching the poor beast. Her head lay listless on the straw; her body shook with pain and terror; just now and then she gave a low, deep groan that was as pitiful as a human cry for aid.

A glance at her distended bag and swollen teats was enough to tell Griff, not only the cause of the mischief, but the length to which it had gone.

"Eh, but she was bonnie; I'd liefer have lost any two of them than her," said Joshua.

"It's never too late to cure," put in the other briskly. "Will you let me try my hand with her?"

Again that queer look came to Joshua's face. "You are young, Mr. Lomax, to think you can teach such as me." He paused, and looked again at the lolling head and shivering flanks, and pity mastered jealousy. "I wouldn't see a beast in pain, and leave aught untried," he went on slowly. "Ay, you shall have your way with her—though she's long past us by this time."

Griff's coat was off already and he had rolled his

sleeves above the elbow. He knelt beside the cow, and began gently to chafe her legs and back; and all the while he soothed her with his voice. The poor beast turned her languid eyes on him — great, tender eyes they showed beneath the lantern-light—and seemed to recognise a friend.

At last Griff stopped for breathing-time, and asked for salt and sacking, gin and peppermint, and flour and treacle. They were all to hand, for Royd had already tried the well-known remedies.

"I've tried them all," muttered old Joshua.

"We'll not say die yet," the other answered, as he emptied the salt into one of the squares of sacking and made a rude poultice, which he laid gently on the roan cow's back.

Farmer Royd, meanwhile, had mixed the peppermint and gin, the flour and treacle, into a syrup, and had brought it in a horn.

"Now, lass, now," Griff murmured soothingly, "hold up your head a bit, and trust to your friend in need."

It seemed as if, by very force of sympathy, of kindliness, he put new life into the beast, for she made an effort—then a second and a stronger effort—in answer to the pressure of his hand upon her head; and last of all she managed to raise herself a little. She let Griff open her mouth and pull her tongue aside, and she gave no murmur when he thrust the horn into her mouth and poured its contents down; only, her eyes were fixed on him, as if to say that she was helpless in his hands and that she trusted him.

The two men stood watching, and now the likeness of the young face to the old was far more strongly marked than it had been before. Watchful, eager, full of purpose were the faces; and the lantern-light showed each strong feature against a background of deep shade. Little by little the beast's brown coat grew streaked with moisture; then great beads of sweat stood out; the physic was doing its work, and doing it well, while, from the quieter

groanings of the cow, it was plain that the poultices were "drawing out the pain," as the Ling Crag farmers put it.

"I'll tempt her with a bit of something," said Griff by and by.

He knew that kine are as dainty of appetite, when they are sick, as any ailing folk, and only by patient trial could he know what food would tempt the roan to eat. First he tried her with a mouthful of rich hay, but she would not touch it; then with a warm mash of bran, sweetened with a dash of treacle. She looked at this with a show of interest, sniffed it delicately as a petted maid might do, and last of all began to eat it. When she had finished, and given him a grateful look from her big eyes, he fell to chafing her legs and udder. Another draught of the physic followed, and again the sweat stood out from her coat like dew upon the ruddy autumn leaves of bilberry.

"Begow, but you don't spare yourself!" cried Joshua Royd, with grudging admiration.

And, indeed, Griff was as dripping wet as his patient by this time, for he was chafing her limbs with redoubled vigour, and that sort of work is hard.

"Now, lass, now," he murmured at last. "You're well enough to lift yourself a bit. There! See you, Joshua, she can hold up her head with anyone."

The roan, responding to the care and trouble taken on her behalf, responding still more to Griff's odd power of giving out a certain strength and hope to all dumb animals—the roan was lying down no longer in the old helpless way, but lay among the straw more as if she had settled there for a comfortable night's rest. She ate a second mash of bran with fair goodwill, and then Griff covered her with blankets.

"It would never have done to lose her," he said, stretching himself with a sigh of relief. "She takes it bravely, Joshua, and she'll pull through."

"She has pulled through. Dang me if I know how

you've done it, for I never—never in all these years—knew a beast get up again when once she'd laid herself down to die. However, it's a grand night's work, Mr. Lomax, and, now that we can leave her for a bit, just step into the house-place with me, and we'll have a taste of rum."

Griff, nothing loth, followed Royd into the house and flung himself into the fireward corner of the settle; tired out as he was, the warmth and homely comfort of the room were vastly pleasant. Joshua, after he had filled their mugs, sat down in the big hooded chair which was built to keep the upland draughts at bay; then he lit a long pipe, and smoked it as only such slow, honest folk can smoke a pipe.

"It's queer that you've done so much for me," said Joshua, after a restful silence. "You might be your father over again."

"Ah, you knew him well?" said Griff.

"Knew your father? Do I know my own face? He was good to me, very good, once on a day when trouble came, and I cried like a bairn when he died. Ah, you don't know what your father was! There's none knows, save us that are old enough to remember him in his prime. There have been Lomaxes at Marshcotes Manor pretty well since time began, but your father topped the lot."

Griff thrilled to the touch of old tradition. He remembered his father dimly enough, as a jolly comrade who had taught him when a youngster to ride, and shoot, and fish, and tell the plain truth to every man; but his hold upon the family pride was sure and clear. For years he had trained himself to think little of such matters—to think much, on the other hand, of labour such as placed him on a level with the farmer and the hind. What was he doing, out here in the waste, he asked himself to-night? Had he no duties waiting for him in the place which had lacked him all these years? His thoughts returned

to the old Manor House, neglected now; to the garden where his mother had tended the ladslove and the lavender, the double-daisies and the stocks, the pansies and quaint London Pride; he remembered the money lying idle year by year, when his poorer neighbours looked to him to spend it. Surely his place was there! He could almost hear the bees humming drowsily among the flowers of the Manor garden, as if they called him home.

The mood, new-born and delicate, was brushed aside for the time being. He remembered another thing—a thing that overshadowed all the past and cut him off from the men who had been faithful aforetime to the honour of the Lomax name. He recalled, too, the penance he had set himself, the penance which had grown to be a tranquil joy.

"I'm puzzled whenever I think of you, Mr. Lomax," said Joshua suddenly, as if he had read something of the other's thoughts. "You've done a fairish bit of intake down yonder at Lostwithens, and you're growing crops and rearing beasts on it, you tell me, though I've never found time myself to come and see. Let's look at your hands, lad."

Griff held out a pair of roughened, sinewy hands, which only by their length and narrowness betrayed his birth; and the farmer looked at them with a grave, dry scrutiny.

"Well," said Joshua Royd at last, "I've lived a tidy while, and I've seen some queerish things, but I never heard the like of this. Gentle is gentle, so far as I've seen, and simple is simple; and well-born hands don't go with spade-work."

"Soil is soil," laughed Griff; "and we've all sprung from it soon or late."

The older man beat quietly with his pipe-stem on the arm of his chair, and nodded his approval.

"Ay, it's a grand friend, is soil," he said. "It keeps good life in us when we're quick, and it covers us

kindly-like when we're safely dead. There's naught trustier than soil; it's honest as a streak of sunshine; what you put into it—ploughing, and seed, and harrowing—it gives you back again. So far as a plain farmer can see, a man will lie as soon as look at you, but there's no slyness about soil."

Griff lay back on the settle, and pulled quietly at his pipe, and watched the farmer's face, with its kindliness, its pathos, its surety of the proven gospel of soil-labour. There were large forces—forces large in their simplicity — latent in Joshua Royd; he never talked of matters that were beyond his ken, never offered guesswork, tricked out as knowledge, touching the subtler themes of life; but, when the farm-business of Ling Crag Moor was talked about, he spoke with an authority assured and grave.

"I wonder time and time," he went on, "how long you mean to bide at Lostwithens, Mr. Lomax. I want to pry into no man's affairs, but you must have a secret almost too big even for your big body to hold, or you wouldn't live apart as you do. Nay, lad, nay! You've no cause to look black. I've been thinking of your father a good deal of late, and it would seem that you might well be such another if you could go back to the old life."

Griff's face cleared as suddenly as it had darkened. Farmer Royd was plainly full of love for his father's family, full of the wish to see him return to his own again; it was as if a friend spoke to him from across the buried years.

"You are right, Joshua," he answered gravely, "I have good reason for the life I lead. As for quitting it, there's an acre and a half to be intaken yet."

"Intake is intake, and few things better; but, lad, you're wanted there at Marshcotes, and so I tell you."

Griff was troubled; yet underneath the trouble was a sense of warmth. Then for a moment he was swept

away by a wild longing to return — to sit in the remembered rooms — to go to and fro among the Marshcotes folk as he had done of old, with head erect and a jest on his lips for every man and child and woman whom he met. The longing passed, and left him cold.

"Bah!" he cried impatiently. "The frost has kept me idle over long, Joshua. I've chosen my life, and there's none better. How can I go back?"

Joshua Royd did not reply; but there was a world of meaning in the steady look he turned on Griff, whose eyes were fixed now on the peats.

"He'll win back one day," was his thought.

The silence that followed was rudely broken; for the door was flung open suddenly, and Ned o' Bracken Clough came in, his big mouth wide with laughter, despite his breathlessness. Without explanation or excuse he dropped on to the settle, laughed again, and asked for rum and water.

"I'm as dry inside as I'm wet without, Joshua," he cried, "and that's saying a deal. Why, Mr. Lomax, I never looked to find you here, though I knew you weren't at Lostwithens."

"Indeed?" said Griff, with a friendly nod. "How did you come to know that?"

"Bide till I've drunk a quart or two, and I'll tell you. By the Heart, though, it was a close shave, as Thomas o' Denby's said when he sliced his chin-end off with a razor."

Farmer Royd, leisurely of movement as ever, set about mixing Ned a measure. He did not approve of the lad's wildness, nor did he care for intrusion at a time of what was real anxiety to him; but no one could resist Ned's breezy charm.

"There, there!" grumbled Joshua, setting down the mug at the new-comer's elbow. "You'll come to a bad end, Ned o' Bracken Clough, as sure as cows chew cud. What devilment have you been after, like?"

"Well, it was this way," began Ned, after he had taken a great gulp of the spirit. "We'd settled, before the thaw came, to have a bit of a poaching-do to-night. Pheasants are fine and tame after a frost—as you'll know, Mr. Lomax, none better—and the keepers aren't too ready to leave their beds. So we settled to have a big party, fair like old times, and to wend across to yond woods that hug the valley just below Alderworth. There was Phineas Feather, and Nat Kershaw from Ragstones Syke, and William Haigh o' the Eagle, and Lord knows who besides; and we were to meet at Slithery Ford."

"I've met you there myself, just now and then," Griff murmured.

"Ay, before you stiffened," Ned answered drily. "As for me, I'll never stiffen now, I'm thinking, until it's time for Sexton Thewlis to take my job in hand. Well, the thaw came, as you know; but I'd set my mind on going, and I went, and there wasn't one of them had faced the weather. 'So,' says I to myself, 'thou'rt all alone, Ned, lad. Well, there'll be all the more for thee to pick up.' So I slushed along as best I could until I dropped down into Alderworth Wood; and I saw here and there a pheasant—oh ay, Mr. Lomax, you'll know the plump look of them against the sky—and I shot a tidy bagful."

"You've brought us none for supper, I'm noticing," chuckled Farmer Royd.

"I hadn't time, for just as I was thinking I'd got enough, I heard a voice like a bull's close at my elbow—and, dang me, if there wasn't Squire Daneholme and five thick-bodied keepers with him. It seems our bit of a spree had leaked out somehow, for it's seldom the old Squire comes frolicking nowadays."

"Did you fight, Ned?" asked Lomax slily.

"Nay, lad, I'll fight one to one, or one to two, but five is longish odds. I just threw gun and bag into the snow, and off I set as fast as I could go. Sakes! I

never want such another run—miles and miles of snow, and soft on the top at that. One thing made me laugh, though, so long as I had wind for it—and that was the thought that the old Squire would have had enough and to spare before a mile was out. He's sixty if he's a day, and some folk say he's softer in the muscle than he was. Softer! Well, all I know is that I ran till my heart was like to burst, mile on mile, and I could never shake off either Squire or keepers. Squire was there, I knew, for I heard him bellow now and again."

"Ay, he can bellow," said Farmer Royd, with slow reflectiveness. He was giving a tolerant ear to Ned o' Bracken Clough, for certain episodes in his own youth were not forgotten.

"I didn't know rightly which road I was taking," went on Ned, after another big pull at his mug; "but at last of all I saw the bit of a hummocky hill that tops Lostwithens, and I knew it; so I slipped down the brink, remembering who it was that lived here, and I opened the door of your hut."

Griff started up. He had left a woman there—a woman proud and delicate—and his anger rose unbidden at thought of this haphazard fly-by-night's intrusion.

"You went inside?" he said.

"To be sure, and found Hester and a stranger-lassie there. Begow, I was frightened more than they were! I'd looked to find a decent man-body there, and I'm sadly shy—all Ling Crag knows it—with the lasses."

Griff sank back into his chair and lit his pipe afresh. It was idle to be angry with such as Ned o' Bracken Clough.

"Well, I said how 'twas with me; and Hester, snod lass that she is, bethought her of the peat-house, and pushed me in, and banked the peats high up in front, just as the keepers came knocking at the door."

"The women have always been a thought soft on you, lad," said Farmer Royd, with little thought that in

a day to come he might recall his words, and know the bitter truth of them.

"Ay, and it's queer, seeing my backwardness in coming forward. But there! Women were turned on a crooked lathe, as Carpenter Joe says, and you can't tell how they'll twist. As I was saying—you keep good rum, Joshua, and I've sweated a deal to-night, snow or no snow—as I was saying, I hid in your peat-house, Mr. Lomax, and I reckoned I was snug as need be. But by and by, after Hester had fooled the keepers to a bonnie tune, old Squire steps in, and looks about him, and tells them to peep in at the peat-house door."

Again Griff moved in his seat. Heretofore it had seemed natural, inevitable, that he should entertain the woman he had rescued from the moors; but now, as he remembered that she was niece to this same "old Squire" who had visited his hut with so little ceremony, a new thought came to him. He was no longer the man of his hands, busy with tending cattle, eager to see the thaw set free his waiting acres; for the moment he returned to his own class, and saw the situation with Squire Daneholme's eyes, and realised what a meeting between the old man and his niece would mean.

Ned o' Bracken Clough, however, noticed nothing. The farmer had filled his mug afresh, and Ned was deep in colloquy with the red-ripe liquor.

"Trust the Squire to see through a thickish wall," said Farmer Royd.

"I trusted him to tie me by the heels for a good three months," Ned answered, "until I minded me, Mr. Lomax, of the far-back day when I helped you to gather in your peats. There was a bit of a door, I remembered, opening from the peat-house on to the mistal yard, so you could cart your fuel and pitch it straight in without ever going through the hut. Well, soon as I knew which way the wind was blowing, I felt for the catch of yond outside door, and I shoved it open quiet-like, and I slipped out as snug as a ratten in a barley-mow, pulling

the door to behind me. I got the start that way, you see, and I made the best I could of it."

"There's a saying about a broken pitcher, Ned," put in the farmer, "but you've gone oftener to the well than any pitcher I've heard tell of yet."

"It's just a way I have, Joshua. I'm that innocent at heart, you see, things fair can't bide to go against me. Lord knows I give 'em chance enough, if it comes to that."

"So what's your next daft notion, lad?"

"Nay, I've been thinking Bracken Clough is scarce a ligging-place for me just now; and I bethought me you always had a soft spot in your heart, Joshua; and so, as I didn't fancy a night out of doors, I just came up to Windy Farm as fast as my legs could carry me, and I said to myself, 'Joshua Royd,' says I, 'will give me a bed on the kitchen settle.'"

"He won't do that," said Griff.

"And why, if I might ask?"

"Because I mean to spend the night on it."

"Nay, nay!" said Joshua. "There's no need, no need at all, for you to think of the roan cow. You've done enough, Mr. Lomax, and I can see to the rest myself."

"Yes, but there's Hester down yonder at the hut, as I told you, and it's too late to ask her to cross from Lostwithens. Just give me the length and breadth of your settle, Joshua, and I shall be content."

"You can have my bed, if you like. I shall be up and about all night, for yond beast will need a bit of watching."

Griff, a Sybarite for once, had no intention of leaving the drowsy warmth of the kitchen, and Farmer Royd, after one or two suggestions that he was offering indifferent hospitality, withdrew to the mistal, while Ned settled himself in the big chair, a pipe in his mouth, and another brew of rum beside him. And then an odd thing happened: weary as he was, Griff had thought a moment since to be asleep almost before his host had

finished protesting as to the hardness of his bed; yet by and by he found himself, quite wide awake, listening to the talk of Ned o' Bracken Clough. There was something in the twist of Ned's talk, something in the breezy, blow-with-the-wind air of the man, that made him a rare comrade: he was linked with many a frolic, too, in Griff's mind, and little by little they began to fight the old battles once again.

"Come out with us again, Mr. Lomax," cried Ned, at the end of a happy-go-lucky reminiscence. "Let's see you stand with your head among the trees, and hear your voice go laughing down the wind, and let's drive in behind you when the keepers come."

It was what the landlord of the Eagle Tavern had said, not many days ago. And now, as then, Griff warmed to the old life.

"Some day I will," he said. "I've a fancy, Ned, I shall find soon that I can't keep away. Just let me get my intake finished first."

"Oh, damn your intake!" cried Ned blithely.

And Griff laughed—no longer the quiet, colourless laugh which had marked him of late years, but a cheery burst of merriment that reminded his comrade of the days gone by.

"What are your plans, Ned?" said Lomax presently. "You'd best be out of Ling Crag Moor for the next week or two; the old Squire soon forgets, but he's a devil to hunt so long as he remembers."

"Ay, I've thought of that. In a week it will all blow over; and so, in the betwixt and between time, I'm going to Wyecollar Dene. A very bonnie spot, Wyecollar, if it weren't for its rackety Riding Squire."

"Better a ghost than a riding squire in the flesh, any way."

"I'm none so sure," said Ned, with sudden gravity; "I saw him once—the boggart, I mean—and I'm not that forward, like, to see him twice."

The door opened, causing Ned—who was as super-

stitious as any of his kind—to jump up from his seat. But it was only Farmer Royd, slow of gait and grave of face as ever.

"She's doing well, yond roan," he said. "Sleeping like a babby, bless her, when I went in; but the light of the lantern waked her, and she lifted her head to look, and—there, you'll think me daft, Mr. Lomax, but I'd take Bible oath she was disappointed, like, to see me instead of you."

"You can read a lot in a cow," said Ned, gaily ironical now that his ghostly fears were killed.

"I can, lad," said Joshua quietly; "but then I've lived with kine, and studied them, and loved them. It makes a lot of difference."

"Now *I* fancy a hare, and there's none can say I haven't both loved and studied them," went on Ned o' Bracken Clough. "What's a bonnier sight than a benty field, with a bit of moor above, and the hares crop-cropping at the parsley sown by yourself to tempt them? Nay, Joshua, nay, you needn't crack up your beasts; I tell you, whenever I dream—which isn't so often—I never see aught but just yond benty field, and just yond hares, brown as a tussocky hillock, with the moon glinting blue on their heads as they shift them to smell down the wind. Pheasants are well enough, and grouse don't come amiss—but, Lord, I love a hare!"

Wearied by the unwonted length of his speech, softened by thoughts of the brown, quick hares which were as dear to him as cattle were to Joshua Royd, Ned buried his hawk-beak nose, his roguish eyes, his ruddy eyelashes, in the mug of rum and water.

"I can talk when you mention hares," he said, in apology; "I was that way from a lad."

"Ay," put in Joshua drily; "and that way you'll be till you're old and grizzled, for you cannot help yourself, I take it. I believe you, lad, when you talk of sowing parsley; it's the only crop you ever reared, so far as I hear tell."

"By that token, Ned," laughed Lomax, "what will your farm do while you're in hiding?"

"Do?" Ned echoed. "She'll jog along, will the farm; she always does; she never nags at a man, same as a wife does."

"The farm will be all the better without Ned," said Joshua Royd. "Peter, his man, tells me every market-day that he is sorely tried in the spirit whenever the master takes to doing a bit of managing."

"I believe you!" cried Ned, with entire agreement. "I can rear poor crops with any man in Ling Crag; but then, Joshua, I very seldom try. What, going? Yond cow of thine might be a sweetheart, you fash yourself so much about her."

Joshua had the door open in his hand, but he stayed for a last word. "You'll be knowing more of sweethearts than I do, lad," he said; "they come and they go, but cows are steady-like."

Something came to Lomax—something intangible, yet quick with foretaste of disaster. The farmer's jesting reference to Ned's sweethearting showed, not as a jest at all, but as a kind of tragic irony, unconscious, yet prophetic. Then, with a shrug, he dismissed the matter, and thought only of the news which Ned had brought. The old Squire had come to Lostwithens, and had doubtless seen and recognised his niece. The Squire had no quiet temper under lighter trials; what would the effect have been upon his guest, soul-sick and body-sick, if Roger Daneholme had ridden his passion on an easy curb, as was his wont?

Ned o' Bracken Clough, after a last mouthful of rum, had dropped asleep in the big chair; but still Griff sat and blew great clouds of smoke toward the fire. And anxious as he was on the stranger-woman's account, he was conscious most of all that Lostwithens, sanctuary once for waifs and strays, feathered or furred or clothed in human garb, was sanctuary no longer. He had fled from the world, and the world had sought him out;

and, under and under all other feelings, he knew, but would not confess, that his heart was yearning for the things of old. Comradeship, love, hate, quick interchange of oath or pleasantry—these had been his life, and they were life to him again during this hour of musing by the hearth.

"Dare I go back?" he murmured.

"Of course," said Ned o' Bracken Clough, waking drowsily. "You dare go back in a week or two. The old Squire—what was it you said?—he's a devil to hunt, but quick to forgive. Go back—of course we'll go back when the waiting-time is over."

Ned dropped asleep again, and the other glanced at him with grave, inquiring eyes.

"When the waiting-time is over," he repeated. "Well, Ned, you had never the makings of a prophet in you, so far as I could see, but you may be one to-night."

CHAPTER XII

GHOSTLY DENE

NED o' Bracken Clough slept like a child throughout the night and until long after the wintry sun had struggled through the clouds. Griff, on the other hand, had risen with the dawn, and, after a visit to Joshua in the mistal to assure himself that the roan was doing well, had hurried down the moor to Lostwithens.

"Mr. Lomax has gone, seemingly," said Ned, as Farmer Royd came in and stirred him from his sleep.

"Mr. Lomax is a man of his hands, and finds work ready to them, same as we all do when we want it. Stir yourself, Ned; it's ten of the clock already. Sakes! You'd sleep if the world was dithering into Judgment."

"Reckon I should," said the other, with a vast stretching of his legs and arms. "If it had got to dither, Joshua—well, it had got to dither, and Ned o' Bracken Clough couldn't stop it if he tried."

"Well, he wouldn't try, that's certain.—You'll be wanting breakfast, lad?" added the farmer, punctilious when hospitality was concerned.

"May be I'd better sleep till noon," Ned hazarded, "and then it will be dinner-time, Joshua, and a meal saved for you."

"May be you'd better be getting Wyecollar way. None but you would have slept on the sort of risk you're running, Ned."

"Oh, bless you, I can sleep on aught; that's how I keep my health. Now you speak of breakfast, though,

I seem to be empty-like somewhere. Did you say a couple of rashers, Joshua? Make it three, for old times' sake."

Farmer Royd took down the bacon, cut three goodly slices, and put them into the pan. He smiled as he did it, and smiled as he set out the brown bread and the teapot; for Ned had a King's-leave of his own to blow at large and take his rest or frolic, just as the wind did.

"It's good to be a wastrel," Ned observed, as he finished the last of his bacon and drank a third cup of tea. "Life goes soft, Joshua, when you're a wastrel, like treading on dry peat."

"Life will go hard, I'm thinking, if the old Squire gets you in his claws."

"There's truth in that, so I'll be wending. I'm a chap with little to say for himself—"

"Save to the lasses," put in Joshua, with a strange insistence on that unsuspecting irony which had moved Griff the night before.

"I've little to say, but—well, Joshua, a friend is a friend, and I don't forget," said the other, steadily pursuing his wish to acknowledge all his debts.

"There, lad, there! I'd help you whatever you did, and that's the truth. Creep softly Wyecollar way, and come again when the Squire has cooled."

Ned gripped him by the hand and went out without another word. The farmer watched him as he struggled painfully through the ever-deepening slush, until at last he was lost to sight among the farther hills.

"Yonder goes a chap you think nothing of, and yet a chap you love; it's queer," he said, as he returned to the sick cow.

Ned, meanwhile, careless as to whether he were loved or thought nothing of, trudged through the slush. He had friends in Wyecollar Dene, plenty of them; he looked for jovial comrades at the least, and, at the most, a chance of poaching among fresh preserves. He could afford to live idly on his means, to rear game himself if

he wished to; but the thing was in the blood of him, and he was wont to say that his stomach resisted any hare or grouse or pheasant that had not been honestly stolen by night.

"By the Heart, we're alive!" he cried, as he pushed his way through the melting snow. "We're alive, and we might full easily be dead. So put that in your pipe, Squire Daneholme, and have a quiet smoke over it."

Once or twice he glanced behind him, as if looking for pursuit; but the dreary, softening moor was empty of all life. Mile by mile he covered, finding none of the well-known tracks, but making for Wyecollar with an instinct sure as Griff's, his friend of other days, in knowledge of moor-lore. At last he reached the crooked gate-stones which told him he was nearing the first homestead of the dene; and so, following the twisted lines of yellow-grey which marked a cart-road lower than the bordering moor, he neared Wyecollar Hall.

Ned o' Bracken Clough, careless as he was, drew in his breath and slackened his pace as he saw the long, grim pile of weather-blackened stone show dark against the clouds. The Riding Squire of Wyecollar was a belief sucked in with mother-milk; there was something in the peevish wind that hinted at the bugle-note which time and again had spurred the ghostly hounds to chase the phantom fox. Ned glanced behind him once more, but not from fear of old Squire Daneholme now; Roger Daneholme was flesh and blood, a man to hit between the eyes, while the Riding Squire would take small count of blows, blows which would pass through him and leave him still the same.

"There is a sound of him in the wind," Ned muttered. "What if he should come riding fair down the roadway here, and I hadn't time to shift? I'd liefer any day be run down by a live horse than by a dead one come to life again."

It occurred to him that, despite his hearty breakfast,

he was hungry and tired with the rough walk. What if he struck up the fields to the Herders Inn, and refreshed himself before seeking out his comrades in Wyecollar? The notion pleased him, and he told himself, with a laugh, that no dread of ghosts could outlive a liberal meal such as his friend, the landlord of the Herders, supplied. And, indeed, so good the meal proved, and so long of tongue the landlord, that night lay heavy on the sodden, grey-white fields when he set off again for Wyecollar. Do as he would, his courage dwindled soon as he reached the road below and neared the gate in the low wall which fenced the Hall garden from the road. One of the upper windows was lighted, and from within there came a sound of many voices.

"A main, a main! My bird against yours for a sovereign," were the first words he heard.

Now, a cock-fight was no new thing to Ned, but what in another place would have seemed usual enough was the cause of cringing dread to the man to-night. The Dene lay very deep in a hollow of the moor, and the wind drove through it with twice the force it could compass on the open heath—sobbing, shrieking, whining as it swept by. The night was dark, without a star; last of all, this hall of Wyecollar was fuller of grim legends than any house within five leagues. Ned o' Bracken Clough recalled the tale of another of the wild Cunliffe breed—how the Squire of that day lay a-dying, and called for a pair of fighting-cocks, and died cheering on the winning bird. How if his ghost had come back to old scenes, old occupations? The Hall had been untenanted and shunned for years; none would enter it for a cock-fight now, unless he were mad, or drunk, or disembodied.

Again the shouts came from the upper chamber, and Ned, drawn by an awful fascination, passed through the gate, and in between the straight, tall hollies that guarded each side of the doorway, and up the worn stone stair. He moved more slowly and reluctantly with every step, and yet he felt compelled to mount.

At last he stood upon the landing, in front of the closed door from under which the light was stealing. With a sudden effort he pushed the door wide open, and looked within, holding his breath for dread of the unknown whose secret he must learn.

What he saw was a company of twelve, surrounding the bodies of two fighting-cocks; one bird was dead, the other was dying in his hour of victory. The men's faces were fierce and eager, and they were shouting wildly, or cursing, according to the wagers they had made. Squat, round-bellied bottles stood in the window-seat, and in the necks of such bottles as were empty were thrust the candles which had guided Ned into the midst of this harsh revelry.

On a sudden Ned o' Bracken Clough broke into a big roar of laughter. His fears were gone, for did he not know every one of these twelve roysterers? They were, in fact, the very comrades he had come to seek in Wyecollar.

The men, too bent on settling their wagers to heed the opening of the door, looked up at the sound of Ned's laugh.

"Why, it's Ned!" cried one. "Why the deuce didn't you come earlier, lad? We've killed all our cocks by this time—not a main but the winner died of his wounds—you've missed as game a bit of fighting as ever I saw in my life."

"I'd have been sooner if I'd known," said the newcomer, with another jolly laugh. "And I wish I *had* known," he added; "it would have saved me a rare fright."

"How's that?"

"Well, I was never just fond of passing Wyecollar Hall, but to-night, when I saw it lighted up and heard you shouting, my hair went straight on end like teeth on a harrow. I thought it was one of those ride-the-devil Cunliffes come back to his own again."

The man who had first greeted him—a slim, loose-

limbed squireen, who chose queer company—slapped him on the back, then poured him a measure from one of the squat bottles.

"It was my own fancy," he said, with an air of pride. "We've been ridden long enough by these Cunliffe ghosts, and I swore we'd lay them once for all. What better than to bring our fighting-cocks here and have a main in the very room where that old sinner died? It was here that t'other Squire, too, killed his wife, and where—"

"Nay, nay! Don't tempt them to creep out," muttered one of the others. "It fair swarms with ghosts, and now we've done, like, let's be getting into a godlier place."

"A godlier place wouldn't hold you, Ralph, for long," said the Squireen. "If you feel your courage oozing, lads, fill up! there's plenty of liquor to go round."

"Well, of all the cantrips I ever heard!" cried Ned o' Bracken Clough. "It's well there's a good handful of us, for I own I daren't bide here a minute if it weren't for company."

"You'd get used to ghosts if you lived near Wyecollar Dene," said the Squireen noisily. "There have been queer happenings at Wyecollar Hall since time was, and lately there have been queer doings too at Rushfell House yonder. 'Twould seem there's a sort of devilment about the Dene."

"Queer doings there?" cried Ned. "Why, the old folk are sober as Quakers at a funeral."

"Ay, but their son was not—Wild Harry, if you remember, who married old Squire Daneholme's niece."

"I remember Wild Harry; he'd take a bit of forgetting," said the other, with a dry laugh.

"Well, you know the way he died—fell down the stair when he was in liquor and killed himself. And the wife came to live with the old folk at Rushfell House."

The Squireen paused, and drank himself a little deeper into boisterousness.

"Lord, she was a bonnie bit of flesh and blood," he swaggered. "Wild Harry led her the devil of a life—

would carry her by main force to the room where we were dicing or cock-fighting and make her watch us, just because she hated us and him and dice and all—would fetch the baby in sometimes, when he happened to be further gone than ordinary, and would reckon to teach it to drink and to swear, and tell it to grow up a man like its father. I tried to comfort his wife, being sorry for her—"

A rough burst of laughter from the drinkers interrupted him, and the Squireen responded with a maudlin leer. And all the while the wind blew eerily without, as if in keeping with the lawless crew and with the tale they listened to.

"I tried to comfort her, I was saying; your big women are more to my liking as a rule, and she was little—but, by the Heart, I never saw a face to match hers. So I bided my chance, and it came one night when Wild Harry forced her to come in amongst us.

"'Damn you, you're mistress of the house; can't you be civil to my guests?' says he, with a funny sort of dignity he put on now and then.

"She was on her mettle that night, and she snatched the glass of liquor he held in his hand and flung it through the window. 'That is what the mistress of the house has to say,' said she.

"Wild Harry lifted his hand to strike her, but I ran in too soon and knocked him into the bottles and the dice-boxes that were littered all across the table; and I set my arm about her and took her out of the room.

"'You are good to me,' said she; 'the first who ever came into this house that has been good to me.'

"So then I was minded to be better, and I bent down suddenly to kiss her, and—well, lads, I'd sooner face the Hunting Squire and all his devils than Wild Harry's wife when her eyes get on fire. I just let drop my arm, and she ran up the stairs.

"'You are the worst of them all,' she said. 'You are a liar and a cheat.'

"And somehow I reckoned I was, I think, and I felt a sort of shame—"

Again the roar of laughter, and again the driving fury of the wind without. Ned o' Bracken Clough felt some of his old uneasiness return, though the mad tale enthralled him.

"Come, lad, you're wading deep in liquor if you talk of shame," put in a grizzled rogue who was propped against the chimney-piece. "Cats and mice will be bedfellows soon if *you* are shamed."

"Well, anyway, I was, and there was something happened two or three days after that sobered me afresh. We were sitting with the dice one night, Wild Harry madder than I'd ever seen him. He'd been losing steadily for months, and now he'd only got a bit of a farm out Trawdon way left to stake. He lost it. Then he staked his dogs and horses, and lost them; his wife, and lost her to Nick Shame the Devil, as we called him for a pet name. I didn't envy Nick his bargain when he went to claim it. Then Wild Harry went clean raving and said he'd stake his soul. There were none of us thought it was worth playing for, so he set a dice-box opposite him and asked the Devil to sit down to it; and first he threw his own dice, a three and a two, and then he tossed the other box, pretending still it was the Devil throwing. A pair of sixes were turned, and Wild Harry got up and threw the boxes and all he could lay his hands on into the blazing logs; and after that he rushed out of the room with a look of stark devilry in his face, and we all crowded to the door to see what was to come next. Well, we did see, rather sooner than we wanted to; for his wife had come half-way down the stair, with her child crying in her arms; and Wild Harry just ran up with murder in his eyes, and tried to snatch the youngster, and fell back all on a sudden. He caught his head on the bottom of the banister, and died there and then, as I told you a while since."

The Squireen had lost all his boisterousness. He was

looking fixedly into a corner of the room, as if he saw again the drama of that ghastly night.

"We well-nigh died of fright, rough and careless a lot as we were," he went on. "Wild Harry staking his soul one minute, and the next lying at our feet with his skull battered in. I tell you, lads, there wasn't one of us sober when he ran out; but after he had fallen there was not a drunken man among us. It seemed a judgment, and for many a day afterward I lived as snug and pratly as Gabriel Hirst, your mad preacher, Ned, from Ling Crag way."

"And after the many a day was over?" put in the grizzled fellow by the fireplace. "You galloped, I reckon, to make up for lost time."

Another laugh went up, broken this time, not by the wind alone, but by a flicker of lightning and a quick clap of thunder. The storm, faint and far away on the distant hills at first, had been nearing Wyecollar all through the Squireen's tale, but none had heeded it till now.

"Sakes! 'Tis an unholy spot, and I'm not just easy in my mind," muttered the man who long since had suggested the break-up of the party.

"Well, then, we'll talk of likelier matters," said Ned o' Bracken Clough, refreshed by a second brew of rum. "It's long since I came among you, lads, and I want to know the gossip. Wild Harry's wife went to the old folk, you say, at Rushfell House? And things went awry with her there as well, I take it?"

"Ay," said the Squireen, moving carefully to the wall as if in search of support. "Just what went on I cannot tell you; but women-servants will talk, and so will men-servants, and somehow it got about that they treated her worse than a dog. Day in and day out it was the same; naught was too bad to say of her, till at last she flared out, just as she used to do at Wild Harry when he tried her too far. I heard the tale from the man-servant at Rushfell Hall—John the Psalmist we call him, because

he sings so many psalms to please the old folk—and he told me he was going down the passage when there came a sound of voices from the right-hand room; and he stopped to listen, and 'twould seem they were telling Wild Harry's widow that she had thrown her husband down the stair. Their own son's widow, and to talk to her like that! I'm roughish, but it beats me how they could do it."

Ned, in some vague way, began to think of Lostwithens, and of the woman sheltering there. He seemed to have the pieces of a puzzle in his hands, and to be seeking how to fit them in.

"And then?" he asked.

"Oh, then she let the Daneholme temper go on a loose curb, and she told them more truths about themselves than they'd heard since they were weaned; and after that, when no one was by to see her, she wrapped up her child and took it in her arms, and went straight out into the moor. That was days ago, when the big snow was falling, and a little lad, who saw her go up the rise, with the snowflakes nearly hiding her, ran in blubbering to his mother and cried he had seen a boggart. She must have died, poor lass, she and the bairn, and I fancy she wouldn't be over sorry to have done with her troubles."

Ned whistled softly. He knew now the name and quality of the woman who had found shelter at Lostwithens, and his first impulse was to tell them that she was safe and in good hands. But Ned was loyal before all things, despite his recklessness, and the master of Lostwithens had always claimed his affection. It might be that Griff wished to shield both the woman and himself from gossip.

As if in answer to his thought, the Squireen lifted himself from the wall a little, and began to talk again in a dolorous voice.

"It's a sad end we're all coming to. First one goes, then another. There'll be few of the old breed left soon. Wild Harry's dead, and there's Griff Lomax vanished

like a puff of smoke. He never cared much for the dice, didn't Griff, but he was the best of us all when it came to poaching. Lord! the nights we've had! I can hear his laugh yet—it was jolly, and big, and deep —when we knocked up against the keepers."

Still Ned did not break into the talk. Griff had his own reasons for hiding himself at Lostwithens, and the reasons, whatever they might be, were sufficient for Ned o' Bracken Clough.

"I've heard tell that he's taken to ploughing up Ling Crag Moor," put in the man by the fireplace. "Why he should, beats me. He's got a biggish house of his own, and money enough and to spare. Why can't he poach honest as he used to do, instead of wasting time?"

"There's a lot of queer tales going up and down about him," said another. "I was in Marshcotes last market-day, and I fell in with Ephraim Shackleton—him that asked Betty o' th' Nab to wed him, as they came home cosy-like from burying the first wife at Trawdon—and Ephraim told me he hadn't set eyes on him for years until he came among them sudden-like a while since, as they were digging out a corpse-road to Trawdon; and Griff, 'twould seem, got a spade and digged with the best of them, and naught said as to why or wherefore. They say he's fairy-kist, and Ephraim did seem to think—"

The storm broke up his gossip, scattering it to the four corners of the room. The lightning flared and paled again; the thunder came growling, crashing, from the belly of the snow-girt hills.

The Squireen moved unsteadily from his support and stooped to fill himself another measure. Terror and bravado showed in his eyes, and by force of this same terror he strove to show himself more reckless still.

"It's good!" he cried. "Good to have laid yond prideful Cunliffe ghosts—good to stand here, and drink, and tell them we're the masters, after all. Here's a toast, lads! Drink to the Riding Squire!"

Ned o' Bracken Clough, however, did not think it good to be here, as he looked round the chamber. Now the candle-flames, and now the lightning, revealed the dead bodies of the fighting-cocks, the bottles, some upright, some lying on their sides; revealed the wild faces of the men; revealed, last of all, the dark stain upon the floor which was connected with one of the far-off Cunliffe tragedies. Wild orgies of the kind were common enough in his own experience and in that of other dwellers on the moor; but the scene, the wind, the thunder, the underfret of tragedies that could not rest within their graves—these troubled and dismayed him.

"Nay, it's not good, not good at all, though I can stand a deal," Ned muttered.

The others thought the same, it seemed, for not a glass was raised in answer to the toast.

"Drink, curse you! Am I the only brave lad on the moor?" cried the Squireen, swaying to and fro, the liquor running over the edge of his mug as he tried to hold it steady. "Drink, lads! Here's to the Riding Squire—he's had his last gallop, I reckon." Their measures were half-way to their lips when, after a lull in the storm, there came a jag of lightning that ran, wide and forked and evil, across the chamber, striking the iron dogs upon the hearth and twisting them to a fantastic shape. A roar of thunder followed, and then a crash of masonry as the chimney-stack fell inward, filling the chamber with the odour of damp earth and soot. The wind got up again and howled; and then again it shrieked in agony, and swept through the hall door, left open by Ned on his first coming, and ran like a mad thing up the stair.

The Squireen's mug fell to the floor. "By the Heart, it's the Riding Squire himself!" he yelled, and raced wildly for the stair.

A panic fell on all of them, and one stumbled against another as they pushed their way out into the windy,

storm-lit night. The Squireen ran straight on, not heeding that the stream which watered Wyecollar flowed almost past the outer gates. The stream was swollen now with the first of the snow-water, and Ned, close behind, heard a deep cry of terror as the prime spirit of the night's orgies splashed into the flood. In a moment he had jumped in after him, had seen him in a lightning-flash, and had brought him to the bank.

"The waters—the waters of damnation—they're cold, Ned, lad, and they went clean over me," groaned the man, half sober now. "'Twas a judgment, just as a judgment came to Wild Harry. I'll let the Riding Squire go his own gait another time. Didst see him, lad?"

"Not I."

"Well, I *did*. He came in with yond shrieking wind, and his face was Wild Harry's, and I smelt the reek of the fox's brush—"

Ned o' Bracken Clough, who never lost his cheeriness for long, laughed carelessly.

"It's a sad end to a brave junketing," he said. "Come your ways with me, for I mean to bide a night or two with you."

The other struggled to his feet and shook the water from him. "That's well," he said, in a quavering voice. "'Twill be many a night before I dare go home alone. A judgment, Ned, a judgment! The Cunliffes were always fiery-tempered, and I fancied I could mock them now they're ghosts—and see what comes of it. Hark ye," he broke off, clutching the other's arm. "Didst hear the wind? He's riding out in search of me—hide me, lad, hide me in the Nether Pit, so long as yond brawling Cunliffe cannot look at me again. His eyes, Ned, as he rode into the room up yonder! And the smell of the fox! I shall never hunt again."

The Squireen wept aloud, for drink and terror and cold water are apt to play havoc with the best of folk. Ned o' Bracken Clough, however, who kept both head

and patience when they were needed, just slipped his arm about the other's middle and led him up the half-mile of moor that lay between themselves and home. For Ned, who had thought at first that the shock had sobered his friend, suspected now that it had brought a worse thing than drunkenness—that this roysterer, who wept and raved alternately, was in the clutch of the drink-delirium which had been waiting for him any time these six months past.

"I'll fight old Squire for you, never fear," he said soothingly.

"You will? Good Ned! I can fight myself at times—but not when you're hitting at a sort of greyish-whitish air, with coals for eyes, that lets your fists go through it."

"He daren't come within a league of me. He knows Ned o' Bracken Clough," said the other, forgetting his own superstition in face of his friend's agony.

The heath lay white and dumb beneath their feet; the moon shone, exquisitely fair, upon the land; far out above the hump of Dead Lad's Rigg a single star shone fixed as hope, watching the last tattered wreckage of the storm. But the Squireen noted none of these things, and Ned had work enough to lead his host to his own door.

Once inside, however, the Squireen lost his terror, and grew so sober that he needs must drink again.

"Gad, old gamester, I fancy I've been drunk," he said, as he held his glass against the light.

"That's odd," Ned answered gravely; "'twas just the self-same fancy took me as we climbed the Rigg."

"And now I'm sober," went on the other. "Well, I've heard of wilder nights, as the carrier said when the wind blew him off his seat at the top of Wild Wind Rise. Fill up, old lad—but we'll not drink to the Riding Squire this time."

CHAPTER XIII

SANCTUARY

GRIFF, after leaving Windy Farm, walked down as fast as might be to Lostwithens. He was anxious on Mrs. Nethercliff's behalf; for, viewed in the raw, cold light of morning, Squire Daneholme's visit to the hut showed even more disastrous than it had done last night. It seemed impossible that he should actually have stood within the room, and yet have failed to recognise his niece. Such recognition would bring down a storm of fury on her head; and she had suffered enough of late, surely, to be spared this new ordeal.

Hester Royd was crossing to the well-spring with a pitcher when he reached Lostwithens. The wind had deepened her rich colour, her hair was floating, thick and black, down to her supple waist, just as she had left it when settling down to sleep the night before. To a man who cared for such things, she was a sight worth crossing any length of moor to see.

"Is the roan better?" she asked, with a sly laugh.

"Is Mrs. Nethercliff no worse? That is the first question."

"Oh, I fancied the roan meant more to you, like. Well, she's no worse, and no better. There's a weakness keeps coming over her, and she can't throw it off."

"Squire Daneholme was here last night? Did he know her? But there! Of course he would."

"He didn't, though. She just kept her face turned to

the fire all the time, and the Squire was so blazing mad about Ned that he never paid any heed to her. Oh, that will be news to you. We had Ned o' Bracken Clough to visit us last night. It was latish, I'll own, for two lone women to be having a visitor, but Ned doesn't know night from day."

"I know he was here; and, by that token, Hester, he sent you a message."

The girl tossed her head. She had hoped, without knowing it, that Griff would like to see the weight and beauty of her hair, that he might, just for once, be roused to admiration. Nay, she had hoped more than this, in the first quick gladness of seeing him come down the rise—had looked in his eyes for a touch of that passion which was consuming her and making waste her days. But Griff's answering glance had been full of quiet regard—the regard which maddened Hester. And so she tossed her head, having few methods whereby she could hide her feelings and keep the tears in check.

"Where did you see him?" she asked listlessly.

"He came straight up to Windy Farm, and found your father sitting by the hearth with me after we had saved the roan; and he told us his tale; and his message was that you were not to look for him for the next week or two. He has gone to Wyecollar until things have blown over."

"Some folk are good at thinking they're wanted. Why should I look for Ned o' Bracken Clough?"

"Well, he's worth looking for," said Griff, not knowing that his kindly wish to see these two safely wedded was gall to Hester.

"Is he? That's news to me, at any rate. He told you how I hid him in the peat-shed?" she added, after a pause, though she had no longer any interest in last night's escapade, no curiosity to know how Ned had managed to disappear so suddenly.

"Yes," laughed Griff, "and how neither the Squire nor his keepers remembered that a peat-shed is apt

to have two doors. Ned just slipped through the outer door while they were pulling the peats away."

"Oh, ay, that's like a trick of Ned's. There's never a corner you can pin him into but he'll find a way to wriggle out. He's as good a wriggler as ever I set eyes on; I will say that for him. Now, Mr. Lomax, you'll be wanting to see *her*, and I fancy she has—has missed you, like."

It cost Hester a good deal to say as much, and even as she spoke she wondered why she should give herself such needless pain. The instinct was that of a sorely stricken animal, that will bite itself to ease its other pains.

Griff guessed nothing of the under-storm, but went quietly in and greeted Mrs. Nethercliff. Hester did not follow; instead, she bound her hair up into a loose coil, looked oddly at the hut, then set off to Windy Farm.

"I've left them to it!" she murmured, with a sob.

Mrs. Nethercliff smiled, much as a tired child might, when Griff came in. The excitement of the night, the regrets and longings and memories of old days which the Squire's coming had roused, had been followed by deadly weariness and depression. She was up and dressed, indeed, but she looked as if bed would have been a likelier place for her.

"You had visitors last night, I hear?" said Griff, shaking the rain from his coat.

"Yes. Do you know, I have been thinking about it ever since; it brought back so clearly the stories uncle used to bring home to breakfast with him, after a long night with the keepers. I little thought in those days I should be in the midst of such a scene myself—and pass unrecognised."

"Hester seemed bewildered by Ned's disappearance, which was simple enough, after all."

He told her of the way of Ned's escape, and how he had sought shelter at Windy Farm, and how he

purposed lying quiet a while, trusting to the Squire's power of forgetting a grudge.

Mrs. Nethercliff laughed softly. "He must know uncle well," she said; "his rages are too hot to last, and when the calm follows—why, he wants to give to the enemy with both hands. Only—he is not always so—there are things he cannot forgive."

Griff knew that she was thinking of her own offence against the Squire, in marrying against his wishes; but he would not let her dwell upon the topic. Instead, he stooped to acknowledge the welcome given him by Trash, who was fawning on him, jumping on him, barking and whining and giving mock growls, all in the same breath.

"He's asking me to praise him for standing guard last night," Griff laughed. "Well, lad, well! You need not eat me, even if I have come back, and even if you have done well."

"The poacher—what is his name?—might have murdered us both, so far as Trash was concerned. While I was wondering what this big, red, dripping man had come to the hut for, and thinking that, after all, Trash would protect us, the dog just sniffed at him once or twice and then began to wag his tail."

"That's the way of all dogs with Ned. Indeed, I never met dog or man yet who didn't like poor Ned."

"What of Hester?" said Mrs. Nethercliff. "I watched them both last night, and, though there seemed to be an understanding between them, and Hester was ready in a moment to conceal him, there seemed—well, something wanting. She did not look at him, somehow, as if she cared so very much."

"And you saw all this in the midst of such a midnight interruption?" said Griff, with amused surprise.

"One's senses seem sharpened after illness—perhaps one looks for little signs more curiously—I do not know. But Hester interests me; she is so good to look at, so

clean and strong and self-reliant; she would not care for a man by halves, I think."

"Well, we must hope that Ned will win her. She might be the making of him, and her heart is free for any man to capture, I should say."

Mrs. Nethercliff, younger in years than he, looked pityingly at him, as if in some way he needed protection. It is the look which women who see clearly are apt to give to men who cannot read the finger-posts of love. Broken by trouble and sickness as she was, knowing the swamps which waited for those who followed the road of passion, this woman still was eager to scent a love-romance, and follow the winding ways of it. But she did not tell Griff of another side to Hester's feelings, nor interpret that eager, starshine look which she had seen in the girl's eyes whenever the master of Lostwithens stood beside her.

"And the cow is cured?" she asked by and by, with gentle irony.

"By a miracle. We nearly lost her."

"It seems so strange to me, as I was telling Hester last night, that you should go out into the snow and dreariness just to help a farmer with his cattle. I used to think I knew the moor-folk; it was a favourite whim of mine, you see, to ride up into the moor, and stay for tea at the first farmhouse that took my fancy; and oh, I thought myself so wise about these good folk, while really it was only the picturesqueness and the manners that I saw."

"There's not much picturesqueness, time and time, about the life; but it's better than any other I have known."

Last night's impulsive yearning for the old life was gone completely now. He had forgotten Farmer Royd's insistence on the duties that lay waiting for him at the Manor. He was here at Lostwithens, in sight of the acres he had won by toil, and already the snow was melting fast from that barren space, yet un-

redeemed, which he meant to conquer before the year was out.

"I shall leave you very soon," said Mrs. Nethercliff abruptly. She had been following her own train of thought.

"Not yet a while; I will not hear of it."

"But you have borne so long with me, so patiently, and—and your nights are all discomfort."

"You will be ill again unless you stay and rest yourself," he answered bluntly. "Do you think either man or woman could go through what you have done and gain strength in a moment?"

"I must not be ill again," she pleaded, almost piteously. "I shall be well and strong—quite well and strong in—in a day or two—and then I shall leave you."

"And I shall let you go out to death a second time, you think? I shall not, for I should have a woman's life on my conscience."

He had spoken half lightly, but with the last words he winced and glanced away, and the other saw a curious, haunted look come into the stern face. Griff conquered himself in a moment, however, and turned again to her.

"You are foolish," he said sharply.

"No, I am helpless," she cried, with a brief flash of bitterness and pride. "I am helpless, and I like to stand alone."

"Then wait till you are strong again, and you can thrust my help aside."

"No, no! I did not mean to wound you! But I am a stranger to you—"

"Not quite," said Griff, with a sudden glance of fellowship. "Did we not once weave glamour out of a hunting-day?"

"That's true, and—oh—I am tired—more tired than you can guess."

Pride and rebellion were gone. She only knew that here was a man she trusted, that for the present she was

safe and sheltered. And so their lives, from that day onward, moved in a groove so peaceful and so sure that Nell Nethercliff forgot the strangeness of her intercourse with the master of Lostwithens. More and more, as time went on, she looked back upon the past as on a shadow-land, a thing unreal and fantastic; this only was the real world—this wilderness of moor which bounded a hut, a clump of byres and stables, a sweep of land intaken from the ling. The magic of the heath was taking hold of her, stealthily, surely, wholesomely, as is its wont, and the wonder of this new life came to her as to a child comes its first conscious knowledge of the heritage which God has given it. Indeed, Mrs. Nethercliff, in these days, was a child; her sudden cry, "I am tired, more tired than you can guess," had been the confession of a weakness that was not to leave her readily. The shock of her exposure to the snow on the night when Griff had rescued her, even the death of her child, might have been overcome; but the years of misery, of degradation, of suffering, bodily and spiritual, at her husband's hands—these claimed their due, now that the strain was over. She had no illness that a doctor could have named; she suffered no pain; it was just that she was weary, like a little child at candle-time, and all that she asked for was to rest.

Now and then her pride rebelled, and she would talk of leaving Lostwithens in search of her friends at Halifax; but each time Griff, assured and masterful, forbade her going until her strength returned. And she yielded, almost without protest; for she knew that he was right, and that he understood her weakness.

As soon as the snow had left the heath she had begun to wander out of doors, at first for a short half-hour or so each day, and afterwards for longer periods. And ever the one thought was with her—how full of peace, and truth, and cleanliness this new life was in a land which neared the sky. This, surely, was the secret of Lostwithens, she told herself. Down yonder in the

valleys the sky was far off, shut out, the most of it, by towering hills; but here it seemed to lean confidingly upon the heath, twin-brother to the dingled waste of ling and bracken. Sometimes at night, when Griff was in the mistal or the stable, she would steal out, and lift her tired face to the sky, and watch the white, strong stars look down upon her littleness; and the stars, too, seemed very near; and in the knowledge of her littleness she found her peace.

She had thought, in the days which seemed so far away, that an everlasting silence must brood above the farthest heath; she learned now that there was everlasting sound, now low enough to escape any but the quickest ear, now boisterous, now sweet and musical and calm; but always there were voices speaking, and none need be alone upon Lostwithens Moor. When first she came here, with the snow lying heavy on the land, the wind had raved and whistled; afterwards the swish of rain had joined in chorus with the blast; then, as wind and rain crept shamefacedly away, like guests who had outstayed their welcome, there came the roar of swollen streams fed by the melting snow. It was only when the moor lay bare at last, and the breeze hummed gaily from the west, and little buds of green began to swell and burst upon the bilberries, that the Song of the Heath fell to a minor cadence; yet even then the breeze, softly as it smote its rugged lyre of heather, made music which spoke to the woman of fellowship and life. And little by little, unknown to herself, the tiredness left Nell Nethercliff.

Griff had long since ceased to sit up with her at nights. As soon as she was well enough to need less care, he had taken up his quarters in a corner of the laithe, where he had straw for bedding and blankets over him. At first he had found an excuse of some sort each night—there was a cow to be sat up with, a horse that needed tending, and so forth; till at last he would say good-night without comment of any kind,

and she would watch him go, and wonder at the man's instinctive care for her. She had not found such courtesy, such consideration, such entire carelessness as to his own comfort, in the husband she had chosen; she had not found them to the same degree even in the uncle who had been her girlhood's idol.

Yet she was grieved when each night came and Griff, after banking up the fire and leaving Trash to keep her company, went out into the darkness.

"It is not fair," she cried one night, when his hand was already on the latch.

"What is not fair? You worry, child, about the least trifle, while I don't trouble even about big ones."

"But it is cold out yonder where you sleep. I drive you out, and claim your hut, and—and I can do nothing in return."

"I sleep, and I am warm; what more could I ask for, lassie?" he asked, with the half-tender, half-bantering air which came so easily to him in these her days of weakness.

He was gone before she could reply; but Mrs. Nethercliff sat long before her fire that night, and felt her strength come back to her, and said that she would surely leave upon the morrow.

The morrow came, bringing Griff with it—a hungry Griff, intent on breakfast—a Griff whose face was glowing with sheer health and pride of life, as he came fresh from his bath in the pool which he had fashioned for the purpose in the peaty stream above Lostwithens.

"I must go," she said, setting out their scanty breakfast-things and avoiding his glance.

"Am I your gaoler, child, that you are so anxious to escape me?"

"My gaoler!" she cried, with a sudden passion that had in it something of the old-time fire. "God give me none but gaolers, if you are one."

The words startled her; she did not know what moved her to talk so wildly upon impulse; yet she felt

no shame, knowing that Griff would never think of interpreting the words as a man less absorbed in toil and loneliness might well have done. For Griff, in many matters, gained breadth of view from the width of the horizon that bounded the moor-wastes about him; and now he understood her—understood that her cry was such as Hagar might have given, if amid the wreckage of her life she had found true sanctuary in the wilderness. He too had been an exile—was still an exile—and he understood.

"There is time and to spare," he said gently. "Wait till the spring is really here."

"First it was, 'Wait till the snow goes'; then, 'Wait till the moor is dry'; and all the while I am a burden on you. No, I will not stay longer."

She went to the door and opened it. If there must be a trial of strength between them, why should she not conquer just this once? Yet, even as she looked out upon the sunlit heath, and listened to the sun-song of the lark, her weakness came on her again, so that she had to clutch the door-post to keep herself from falling.

Griff came and led her back into the room.

"We'll breakfast now," was all he said.

It was only when the meal was finished, and Mrs. Nethercliff was summoning all the obstinacy of her race to help her, that Griff recurred to the subject of dispute.

"You are not going to leave Lostwithens yet," he said.

And she wondered that her will, so keen and vehement of yore, fell back and knew its master. Yet more she wondered that defeat was restful, welcome.

"As well fight one of the rocks you dig so plentifully from your intake," she said, smiling quietly at him as he lit his pipe.

"Just about," he answered briefly.

Soon afterwards he went out, and Mrs. Nethercliff was

left to wonder if she were glad or sorry that he held himself in check at every turn. Once she sighed, for it hurt her, somehow, to realise that this man, young and full of health, should look at life with the large, impersonal vision of one dead to his own feelings. Again she asked herself, not for the first or twentieth time, what secret shadowed all his days. She remembered his strange shrinking, as from a blow, when he had once said idly that to let her leave Lostwithens was to have a woman's life on his conscience. The remembrance brought no light, however; she could only guess that, far back in the past, he had thoughtlessly brought some moorland lass to ruin — and worse, may be. Yet the guess did not satisfy her; a tale of that kind did not fit with what she had learned of the master of Lostwithens; the thread of his life-story, she was sure, was woven of finer and more tragic stuff than that.

"Oh, I'm a woman," she said impatiently at last. "Perhaps he has no story; perhaps he is tired of the world, and none but the fools are less than tired; at any rate, a woman's curiosity will neither help nor hinder him."

She opened the hut door and stood upon the threshold, watching him, as she had often done, while he plied spade and pick. The land he had redeemed, now that the snow no longer hid it, now that the sun and wind had gained their drying power, showed well tilled and fair. A field of oats lay green upon the right; a wide strip of land on the hither side shone glistening where the sun struck grey upon the upturned furrows; and next to these there was the corner which Griff had set himself to intake from the heath within the year.

Mrs. Nethercliff, who had seen little but drudgery in the labour at first, had found a wider outlook. Imperceptibly—as imperceptibly as the moor was giving her peace—she was learning that there was poetry in the work. Yet there was nothing to be seen which might be thought to take a woman's fancy—a long, two-foot

trench, deep enough to show the sand beneath the upper peat—a man stooping, now to a spade, now to a pick, turning the virgin soil into the trench on his right hand, or throwing the bigger stones into a wheelbarrow—that was all. But, as she watched, the old trench was filled up, the new one dug; and, looking at the land already won, she realised this morning what had gone to the making of that field of oats, those sunlit furrows. Each two-foot breadth must have been trenched as this last breadth had been, each field must have been won by toil that had stretched, tense, patient, never-resting, from dawn to dusk of countless working days.

"God has made a man at last," she cried, not knowing she had voiced the thought.

Few men, save of the moorward sort, and fewer women, could have understood the scene. A man working with a spade, while the sweat dripped from him in a shower—a yellow ribbon of sand to mark the new land won—what room was there for poetry? But Nell Nethercliff had known the deeps, as Griff had done, and between them was that bond of understanding which, until now, had not been knotted tight.

Griff, pausing at the end of his trench to dash a hand across his forehead, saw her standing at the door and came towards her.

"Something to drink," he laughed. "And if the quart pot comes handiest, I'll not complain."

As though she had known the life a score of years, Nell turned and went indoors, and presently came back with a brimming measure in her hand. This, too, she liked; for, sudden as was the change from poetry to simplest prose, it softened the thought of that stupendous five years' solitude, filled full of patient spade-work, from which her mind recoiled.

She watched him drain the liquor in three satisfying gulps, and held out her hand for the empty mug.

"Surely I was a moorland lassie once," she said. "All

seems so natural — as if no other way of life were possible."

"It is not dull and foolish to you?" Griff asked, with a quick glance.

"It is wise and good to me," she answered, and left him wondering.

CHAPTER XIV

REMEMBERED PATHS

SPRING was gaining a surer hold upon the land, though her battle with the winter was one of skirmishes, of quick advances and covering retreats; there could be no steady progress upon Ling Crag Moor, and spring and hill-folk alike were satisfied if more ground were gained than lost.

Griff, keenly as his mind was fixed upon the intake, found leisure, as of old, to wonder at the mingled daring and timidity shown by this strong young spring. Grant it a day of western breezes, of sunlight striking through the grey cloud-woof—and, lo, it leapt and gambolled like a lamb whose play recks nothing of such tempests as the sad-faced mothers know. Two days of kindly winds, and the crowberry would change, at the tip of every jagged spike, from dull green to lively red, in token of the flowers to come; the bilberry would push up its wiry fingers nearer to the sky; the bents would wave, no longer sad and brown, but grey and glistening. Then the wind would shift to the north, and a steely blue would cover all the sky, and down upon the wantoning life of leaf and bud the pitiless snow would drive; these were the "lamb storms" of the uplands, and mother-ewes, as they gathered their young ones under their fleeces, would wail day-long until their voices were sadder than the wind's.

It was after a lamb-storm such as this, lasting three days, after the wind had crept to the coy south again,

and tempted the spring to forget its late harsh treatment, that Griff stood in the stable, saddling the mare. Against his will—for it was possible to work the land again—he was getting ready to ride out to Ling Crag. The mare saddled, he led her round to the hut, and called to Mrs. Nethercliff.

"I have to ride to Ling Crag. Will you be lonely, if I leave Trash with you?" he asked.

"Lonely? On a day like this?" she cried.

He followed the sweep of her hand, and drew a great breath of wonder and content. Not a cloud was in the sky; the sun, noon-high, was mellow as if he had borrowed, like a spendthrift gamester, on the credit of the summer riches coming to him. The Skipton hills lay bold and swart in outline, and behind them, rise on rise, the big land climbed and fell, and climbed again, until it reached the rolling topmost spur of Ingleborough. North and south, east and west, there were hills and further hills; and here, in the basin of them, was a gracious, sun-steeped land where surely no storm would ever come again. High up toward the sun a black speck rose and fell, and its music seemed to fill the dome of heaven.

"Ah, God, the lark!" the woman murmured. "I thought that he would never find heart to sing again—I thought— Tell me, is this the moor that killed my child, and spared me only because it thought my cup of sorrow was not full?"

Griff glanced at her with some disquiet; she had been so tranquil during these last days, so content to know her weakness and to rest, that it surprised him to find her slipping, even for a moment, into the bitterness of thought and speech which had marked her first coming.

"The moor is no better and no worse than ourselves," he answered slowly. "Sometimes it is a brute beast, and sometimes it is a god; and oftener still it does not know its own mind, and wavers between the two. Now,

child," he broke off, with a laugh, "you are not to be grave at all on such a day, for you make me foolish, too. Will Trash be strong enough, think you, to protect you from all the poachers, vagabonds, and ne'er-do-weels that seem to seek Lostwithens as if they had a right to it?"

Her mood had changed, quickly as the spring's.

"To be sure he will; besides, your ne'er-do-weels, when they do come, seem harmless folk who only want a hiding-place, or a crust of bread. I am glad, too, that you are going to Ling Crag; you cannot go on, day after day, with that heart-rending work of yours down yonder."

She pointed to the intake, and Griff laughed at her, in the friendly fashion that was growing easier to him every day.

"Heart-healing work, call it," he said, as he got to saddle, "and I grudge the waste of a half-day. Good-bye, child—no, Trash, bide where you are—good-bye; I shall be back before dark."

She watched him cross the lower edge of intake, watched him as he rose to the trot when the smooth peat beyond was gained, watched him until the mare and he were lost behind the farthest rise. She noted the ease with which the two of them, horse and man, overcame any difficulties of the track; they seemed to be one, not two, in understanding; and suddenly the memory recurred to her of that day when she had chased the fox with Griff beside her. Then, as now, he had ridden as only men ride who have been set on horseback at the age of four or five, who from that time onward have lived the best part of their days in the saddle. Five years of intake had not robbed Griff of his instinct, and Nell Nethercliff, as she watched him out of sight, saw him, not as a man grown grave in sorrow, but as the lad who had raced and yelled, on that remembered day, behind the sweating fox and clamorous hounds.

Was this the reason, she asked herself, why these last

days had moved so tranquilly? They had been free from intrusion, he and she, save for Hester's visits, and yet their nearness, their intimacy, had seemed as natural as that the wind should blow. Was it because they had known each other long ago, because they shared the memory of one day's romance? No, it was not that. This new-found peace was a thing born of more sage experience, born, too, of the great silences and under-frets of Lostwithens Moor.

For a long while she stood there, her eyes upon the distant hills. She was wondering to what place her pride had fled — her pride, more than sufficient once, which now permitted her to stay here, day after happy day, dependent upon the bounty of another.

"Yet I do something for him! Yes, surely, I do something," she pleaded with herself. "It cannot be so lonely for him through the long evenings—and sometimes I persuade him to change his clothes, when he comes in wet through with rain—and—"

She checked herself, and gave a little mellow laugh—a laugh which only growing happiness could bring. She saw the girl, proud, wilful, full of the Daneholmes' large disregard for any but the Daneholmes' will—and again she saw the woman, mated to a ruffler—and yet again she saw the woman who stood here now and looked across the moor. Was it possible that she could meekly claim credit because she helped to while away the winter's nights for one who laboured with his hands? Was it credible that this lone dwelling in the waste was such a home to her that the thought of leaving it was a sadness and a terror?

Again she laughed; for she was seeing now as the sun sees, and the stars. There were no fetters here on Ling Crag Moor; men and women were slaves to none of the weak human laws; they were strong by instinct, or they sinned by instinct, and the decency or squalor of their lives was bounded, not by dread of social rules, but by the bent of their own hearts.

"I should grow to be one of them, if—if I could only stay here," she finished, with a sigh.

Griff, meanwhile, was riding toward Ling Crag, thinking of the work he was forced to leave behind, and again of the magic of the hills, whose old heads snatched a glory, as of youth, from roving wind and steadfast sun. The errand that was taking him across the moor was unimportant enough, but it was one which he could not neglect. Heretofore Farmer Royd had carried his oats to be ground at the mill in Hazel Dene, and had brought back the ground meal to Lostwithens at such intervals as Griff needed it. The arrangement had been made when Griff fought shy of mixing with his fellows, and had continued until now. Royd, however, was ailing, and, though he would have gone as usual, in spite of sickness, Griff would not hear of it.

The mare, glad to scent the spring again, cantered recklessly across the humps and hollows of the moor, and for the most part Griff let her have her head, curbing her only where the ground was treacherously wet, or when they came to stony ridges. At the head of Hazel Dene he dismounted, slipped the bridle through his arm, and went slowly down the path. He looked to right and left of him, and saw the oaks, the rowans, and the hazels climb up the slopes, saw the marshy underwood where oak-ferns would soon be pushing out their fronds, despite the nearness of rough clumps of ling; he heard the bubbling laughter of the stream as it slipped and scrambled past the gnarled tree-roots—roots that stretched out above the water, making darksome caverns where trout were waiting for the tickler's hands. Above all, he smelt that fragrance—peculiar, he had always thought, to Hazel Dene—which was compounded of so many sweets. Scent of wet earth, of last year's leaves, of green-stuff pushing forward—scent of the breeze, as it brought the odours of the heath with it—scent of the mistal yard which hugged one edge of the dene—all

these were blended into a fragrance such as, once known, could no way be forgotten.

Griff halted in the path, while the mare, eager to be moving on, came close to him and rubbed his cheek with her brown muzzle.

Tears clouded thick to the man's eyes; for the scent of Hazel Dene had brought back the past as neither sound nor sight could do, though sight and sound had each its message from lang syne.

"I should not have *dared* to come," he said impatiently, as he dashed his hand across his eyes.

It was true. He had schooled himself to let the dead past lie, and he should not have dared to come to this one corner of the moors. For Hazel Dene, with its chattering brook, its wayward bridle track, its peace of shadows fringing sunlit patches, had seen the glory of his days, when he wooed, and fought, and wandered by the streamside, counting the measure of his happiness. It was here that his wife and he had walked together in those first days of wedlock, when the world seems big, but not so big as love; the corner of the path at which he was standing now had harboured the first primrose, he remembered, and she had found it and had brought it to him with a child's laugh on her lips and a woman's love-light in her hazel eyes. Deeper than the years of toil, deeper than the content which he had held so long as the price of his victory over the heath, the old life lay, and waked, and cried aloud.

"Lassie, lassie, you should have stayed with me!" he murmured.

But the dead wife did not reply; only the lark made answer, the peewits, the stream that laughed and bubbled at his feet. He jerked the bridle roughly —much to the dainty mare's surprise—and went forward down the dene. Never again, he told himself, would he come to this haunted place which he had shunned so constantly during the years of his exile.

As he neared the last bend of the track that would bring him in sight of Hazel Mill, he heard the beat of hoofs approaching him, and presently Ned o' Bracken Clough appeared, redder and jollier than ever, so it seemed, and sitting his raking, fiddle-headed horse with loosened knees.

"Why, Mr. Lomax," he called cheerily, pulling up. "'Tis a week of Sundays since we met."

"I missed you the last time you sought me at Lostwithens," Griff answered drily.

"To be sure you did! I was what you might call in a hurry, you see, and if it hadn't been for Hester, and a bank of peats, and a door that opened outwards, I'd be thinking things over in gaol. Lord, you should have been there that night! I nigh broke myself with laughter (having to keep it in) as I lay with my nose in the peats, and heard the keepers talking, and the old Squire bellowing, and your dog Trash barking as if he'd waken Bouldsworth Hill from his sleep. And all about me—just Ned o' Bracken Clough, who never thought they'd take such a power of trouble over one simple man."

"You told me as much when you came to Windy Farm that night. And what afterwards, Ned? You left us for Wyecollar, you remember."

"Sakes, yes! And I found Wyecollar, and more than I bargained for. However, that tale must keep, for it's a longish one."

"And you've been there ever since?"

"Nay, not quite, but most of the time. You remember yond dark-headed rake-the-sky we call Dick the Squireen? Well, he had a bit of a party at Wyecollar Hall the very night I got there; and afterwards he saw a boggart, and fell into the beck, and, when I got him home at last, he seemed to get sober; and then, of course, he fell to drinking again so as to waste no time in a life that's short at best; and then the Black Dog hopped on to his shoulder—you'll take

my meaning, for we've seen a case or two in our time—and poor Dick couldn't shake the beast off for many a day. By the Heart, I never heard a man rave so, never! He saw things that crawled, and things that bit, and things that scratched him with red-hot toe-nails. Gabriel Hirst should have been there, I reckon; he'd have found stuff for his next Judgment sermon, and I own it sobered me."

"For a day," laughed Griff.

"Nay, for two! However, I got Dick the Squireen through it somehow; and then, just by way of keeping his thoughts away from his sins, which troubled him sorely as he was getting better, I 'ticed him into a bit of healthy poaching. We fell in with the Wyecollar keepers, as it happened, and thrashed them; but I got a broken head in doing it, and that was good for Dick, for he had to nurse me up a bit in his turn, and he got fair cheerful over it. Never tell me that a night's poaching isn't better than any doctor's physic!"

"And now you're back at Bracken Clough again?"

"I am, but there's a joke about the way I came back too. Seems queer; but I always happen across a bit of fun, whatever comes or goes," added the ne'er-do-weel, in a tone of gentle wonder.

Griff had been watching him with that look of tolerant affection which Ned o' Bracken Clough claimed from all men as his birthright. He was so wholesome, so careless in his love of frolic, so freehanded withal, not only with his neighbour's game, but with his own possessions. It was like him to nurse Dick the Squireen back to health; if need were, he would nurse all Wyecollar Dene in turn, and never grudge the hardship.

"What happened on your way home, then?" asked Griff, as the other paused to enjoy the flavour of the jest.

"Well, I went away to escape Squire Daneholme, didn't I? And when I'd brought Dick round, and earned my broken head, and patched it up again, I

fancied it was time to be getting home, if only to see how much likelier the farm was looking since I left it to my man Peter, instead of following it myself. So I borrowed one of Dick's horses, and set off as wick as a scoprel, and was wondering, as I came near the Herders Inn, if I'd just step inside and drink to as bonnie a morning as I'd seen this side last midsummer, when who should come riding along but Squire Daneholme himself. He was close to me almost before I saw him, and I pulled up without just knowing why."

"Poor Ned!" laughed the other. "Hester says you can wriggle out of anything, and it seems you wriggled even out of that."

"I did. At first, you see, I fetched my breath, for it seemed fair outrageous that I should have taken all this trouble to keep out of the Squire's way, and then to run right into him. 'Ned, lad,' says I to myself, 'you're out of the frying-pan into the fire, as the pancake said when the bottom of the pan came out.' I looks at the Squire, and the Squire he looks at me, and I saw that he was in a rare good-humour about something—or naught. He's that way, is the Squire—a bairn could lead him when he's at the top of his spirits, and a plough-team couldn't draw him when the fury's on him. Well, he looks at me, and I looks at him.

"'Good-day, Squire,' says I, with a touch of my whip to my forehead.

"The Squire touches his whip to his forelock, too, for it's a way of his to answer any man's manners with the same. And then he looks at me again, and reckons to look grim, though I could see his mouth was twitching.

"'I want you,' he says.

"'That's so,' I answers, innocent as a lamb. 'I was thinking of a drink at the Herders, and you'll be wanting to join me, likely.'

"'You're a damned rogue, Ned,' says he, quite cheery-like.

"'I am, Squire, and thank you,' says I.

"'Well, it's too long since to bear a grudge, and, besides, I've just won a law-case. Come in, you scoundrel, and you shall drink the Herders' best, if you'll tell me one thing.'

"'And glad to,' says I, for I knew his liking for a law-case, especially when he won, and I reckoned all was going fair now.

"Well, we got down from our horses and went inside, and Jabez brought us his best liquor, which is plenty good enough for me, Sunday or week-day.

"'Now,' says Squire, 'I'll lay my horse to a crown, Ned, that you were in the hut that night. How did you trick us?'

"'Went out by the back door, Squire, while you came in at front. Peat-sheds are made with two doors in our part of the moor.'

"He was quiet for a bit, and then he broke out laughing. 'I deserved to lose you, Ned,' he cried; 'but wait till I find you at the old game again.'

"And then I was sorry, like, that I had said anything about the peat-shed. It might have come in handy again, you see."

The finish was characteristic of Ned, who no sooner found himself free of one scrape, through no special merit of his own, than he was planning fresh ones.

"Well, well," he went on, after chuckling quietly over the reminiscence, "it takes all sorts to make a world, and Squire is as queer a mixture as ever I lighted on. Bless you, he stood there, drinking of Jabez's best, and fell to telling me all about his law-case. It was some matter of water, or right of way, or what all; and he was pleased as a lad that he'd beaten the other chap. Now, why should he be so fond of lawyers, when he's as honest as you or me? For myself, I'm pleased to think there's the length of Cranshaw Moor between Bracken Clough and the nearest lawyer; but tastes differ, I suppose."

Griff thought of Lawyer French of Marshcotes, who

once had done him an ill service, and at the same time had unwittingly given him a wife and a year of wedded happiness. All roads of thought, in this memory-haunted dene, seemed to lead to that buried time; he moved impatiently, and Ned saw that he wished to waste no more of the day in gossip.

"Well, you'll have business to see to," he said, "for nothing less would bring you near Ling Crag."

"I am going to the mill for oatmeal. Joshua Royd is ailing, as you will know, perhaps, and I persuaded him to keep the house for a day or two."

"Joshua has been ailing for weeks past. He is not the man he was, Mr. Lomax, though he carries his years as well as may be. I've seen him a bit now and then, you know, though I have been as far away as Wyecollar," he added, with a sly glance.

"And you saw someone else, if I know you."

"May be I did. I fair couldn't keep myself from slipping now and then across the moor."

"Yet Hester never told me you had been. That seems queer, for I wanted news of you."

"Hester wouldn't, I'm thinking."

Something in Ned's quiet words, something half-uneasy in his voice, made Griff glance sharply at him. He remembered Gabriel Hirst's prophecy, and wondered for a moment if the preacher's foresight were clearer than his own; then he dismissed the suspicion, and followed the more pleasant train of thought which was growing familiar to him.

"No one will be better pleased than I to see you married, Ned," he said, breaking an awkward silence. "Hester would be the making of you."

Ned shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I can't see myself with a wife somehow. Does it look likely, Mr. Lomax? You might just as well expect a puff of wind to settle down and rear a family."

Griff only laughed. "She'll teach you better one day, lad," he said, with a farewell nod.

Ned watched him out of sight, and a graver look was in his face than was to be found there often.

"If he knew!" he muttered. "He would have known quick enough once, before he forgot the ways of a lass; but now he's cold to all that. Nay, I'm sorry, and that's the truth—I wonder what's coming over me?"

Ned was ashamed of himself, though he had followed his fancies more than once, in times past, with no awakening to any need for remorse. He felt, in a dim way, that he had made the beginning of what well might prove a tragedy; he realised that Hester was of finer clay, of deeper impulses, than the moorland lasses who at fair or kirk or market shot their bold glances at him and murmured, "Kiss me, if you dare." And well indeed might Ned ask what was coming over him, for he was new as yet to the higher passion that is apt to come once into the lives of all men, grave or careless, ne'er-do-weel or thrifty.

"Heigho! This broken head of mine must be at fault," said Ned, as he turned at last with a laugh and urged the fiddle-headed chestnut to a trot. "It takes time to heal, does a broken head—and I fancy I'll ride up to Windy Farm and see if Hester cannot doctor it."

CHAPTER XV

BY HAZEL MILL

GRIFF speedily forgot Ned o' Bracken Clough, his wooing and his poaching; for the turn of the path had brought him within sight of the mill, and again he had forgotten all save the voices of the dead years, dead hopes, dead tears and laughter that had come, laughter and weeping both, straight from the wine-red heart of life. The three ponds, one below the other, that fed the water-wheel; the lazy dream-song of the wheel itself; the sturdy little mill that laboured cheerfully and paid its way; all, all was of the past, and not a stain of lichen on the roof but brought familiar memories back. Fool that he had been to come through Hazel Dene, fool that he was to halt here, watching Hazel Mill! They were killing the steady peace of years, these memories—peace that had been won step by step, with sweat and terrible endurance.

Yet how the west wind laughed and trickled through the dene—what a misty green this was which clothed the budding trees—how far away and dumb the things of winter seemed.

He shook himself free of fancies—shook his big shoulders as if they carried a material burden—and went down to the mill.

Miller Rotherson was standing in his shirt-sleeves at the door. Ruddy and plump he was, as of yore, and the years seemed to have passed him by without a finger-mark since the time when Gabriel Hirst had come

a laggard swain who doubted if love were not a snare of Belial, to woo the miller's daughter, Greta.

"Well, Mr. Lomax! You remember old friends, I see," cried the miller, as if his last farewell to Griff had been spoken yesterday and not five years ago. Indeed, time passed so equably with him that it was scarcely measured, save by the work and food and evening pipe of each day as it passed.

"I have never forgotten them," said the other, glad of the palpable, red bulk by which the miller seemed to discount all phantasies and vain regrets. "Why, your very garden looks as it did when I last saw it. The double-daisies are showing red and white already, and the peonies are still in the old place."

"Ay, we don't move much at Hazel Mill. Hearken to yond old mill-wheel! It's just of a piece with my days—round and round, as easeful and cheery as if work was play. I'm an oldish man by now, Mr. Lomax, but I can still thank God every Sabbath that He lets me find no quarrel with the world. You're living a far way from here, they tell me," he went on, with quiet curiosity. Then, with a smile, "There's a saying among the folk hereabout," he added, "that far-fetched and dear-bought is good for ladies. May be *she* thinks so too—the stranger-body you saved at Wynyates Kirk."

Griff could not resent the freedom of the miller's speech; he spoke in kindly banter, that was all, and yet it came as something of a shock to the younger man to find that his home at Lostwithens, which he had always thought of as beyond the reach of gossip, should be talked about in every cottage on the moorside. Why could not folk leave a man to his own life, he asked himself, so long as he wished to keep aloof from a world with which he had little concern?

"I came for a bag of meal," he said abruptly. "Put it on the mare's back, miller, for I'm anxious to be home again."

"Nay, nay, don't be hasty, Mr. Lomax! Old tongues

will wag; 'tis the only member, is a man's tongue, that doesn't rust with age; the years seem to oil it, in a way of speaking. As for the stranger-lady, I heard of her from Keeper Thewlis, who came to your hut one night in search of Ned o' Bracken Clough; and I meant no harm—"

"To be sure you didn't, man. It is only that she has been too weak to leave Lostwithens, and now you speak of it in that way, I see that gossip may do her harm. Tell the neighbours to chew the grass that grows nearer home, Rotherson, and not go seeking it among the peat."

"That's a wise thought, and I'll profit by it," said the miller, with the same slow good-humour. "Well, then, here's your sack of meal, and if you won't stop for a talk and a pipe—"

"Not to-day. The next time I come down the dene, miller."

"Well, let it be soon this time, Mr. Lomax. I feel, as I've heard many a body say, that we miss you sorely in Ling Crag and Marshcotes."

Truly, the note was struck with strange insistency, thought Griff, as he rode down the path, the meal-bag swaying on the mare's slender hind-quarters. A word here, hinting that he was missed; a word there, suggesting that plain duty called to him across the wilderness; his own backsliding, at rare intervals, into a wish for human fellowship; slight influences, all of them, when measured by the steady bulk of labour which he had reared as a bulwark against them—yet they affected him as the wearing fall of water-drops affects a stone.

Not willing to return, as he had come, through the haunted wood-ways, he chose the path that led into Water Lane, and so to Ling Crag village. Yet here, too, he could not escape the touch of old association; for he came to the fallen pine-log where Greta once had sat, hiding her naked feet when he surprised her paddling in the beck, and on the log was seated the preacher's

wife herself. One of her boys, a sturdy youngster rising five, was playing near the stream.

She flushed on seeing Griff dismount and come towards her with a smile, and instinctively she glanced at her feet, securely covered now.

"You are thinking of that foolish scene," she pouted. Even as a matron, Greta had never lost her trick of pouting pleasantly.

"And so were you," laughed Griff, "as soon as ever you set eyes on me."

She sighed as she looked up into his face, and saw the lines which had been graven deeper than five years should warrant; for Greta Hirst, winsome in all things, was most winsome, perhaps, in this—she could be true, whatever came or went, to that intimate, peculiar kind of friendship which once had held between herself and Griff—a friendship wholly loving, artless—a friendship which, if it was salted with a dash of playful coquetry, was all the wholesomer for it. This man, who stood beside her now, the reins slipped loosely through his arm, the sunlight strong upon his face, had passed out of her life; year after year had hurried by, and still she had kept her friendship warm for him, if at any time he chose to claim it; then he had come back at last, not long ago, when the snow lay heavy over everything, and she had welcomed him, and made much of him, and sorrowed for his sorrows, as her way was. That was on the day when Griff had walked to Ling Crag, along the road which he had helped to dig from out the snow for Ephraim Shackleton's wife; the light had been dull that day in the preacher's little house, and Greta had seen less clearly what changes time had made in the face which was once so free of care as to be boyish. But now the sun was pitiless in its reading of the features, and she understood.

Greta glanced towards the brook. Her eldest-born was trying to tickle minnows in the stream, and there was a hopeful promise about him that one day he would

revert to the instincts of his forefathers. He looked alive and lusty, and the mother's heart grew still for a moment as she told herself that the big, silent man beside her had once shown promise such as this, had grown to fulfil the promise—and then had fallen headlong into misery.

"Oh, it is hard, hard!" she cried impulsively, lifting wet eyes to his. "What have you done that you should be driven into the wilderness? Here am I, with my boys, and a husband I worship even while I laugh at him, and everything I need to make life pleasant for me; while you—you seem to have lost all."

"Not all," Griff answered quietly. "God only knows what a man may gain where he least looked for it once."

Greta, not liking the desperate pity which the other's acquiescence roused in her, beat with her foot upon the ground—an old habit of hers, he remembered, when she was angry.

"Gain—what is gain, when you miss the best that God could give you? Where is the gain, if a man has no fireside of his own?"

"But, indeed, I have as much as that," he put in, with the smile that had no mirth in it.

"Oh, yes, but not the sort of fireside that I mean, with a wife on the other side of the hearth and children scrambling over one another wherever there's a table to be overturned or a fender for some roguish head to come against, with tears and kisses and a big content to follow. You need not argue with me, Mr. Lomax; I know what the good things are in life—they are few, but worth any price to gain."

Griff felt an old longing come to life again. The earth lay cold and dead above it, he had thought, since the day when the Marshcotes parson read the burial service above his wife; and now a word from a happy woman, a woman so full of tenderness and gratitude that she must needs give to others of her riches, had roused the longing from its

sleep; it was as if a fragrant herb, rosemary or lavender, had sprung from the barren graveyard mould. It was true that a man's days were of small account unless interpreted by wife and children and the sane, heart-softening claims of home. It was true; and yet Griff grudged to admit it. Who was this woman, a girl yet, despite the matron's dignity which she assumed at times, who was she that, in a few moments spent in chatter by a moorland stream, she should sweep away the faith which he had learned from solitude—the faith that man lives best alone with nature?

"Greta," he said, with sudden passion, falling back to the old use of her name, "Greta, you must be mad to bring back such thoughts to me. Cannot you see that, even if I would, there can be no such life for me again?"

Undismayed, she smiled up at him, showing the dimples which her goodman to this day regarded as a snare.

"No, I cannot see that," she answered quickly; "but I can see that you are coming nearer to the need of love. You have been sick, and now you are almost well again; and one day—"

"Hush," he cried; "*she* lies yonder, Greta"—nodding toward Marshcotes—"and such talk is treason—at the best it is foolish, for Lostwithens has grown to be wife and children both to me."

Gentle as Greta was, full of innocent faith in happiness and the comely things of life, she had a worldly wisdom of her own, and could persist in following it when the well-being of her friends was in case.

"Listen," she said, her blue eyes wide and eloquent, "she loved you, did she not? And when men talk of women's love—real love, I mean—they seem to think it is the same fierce, jealous passion as their own. If she loved you, and sees you now, is she happy, do you think, to watch you wearing out your life, lonely and hopeless? You think she would hate another who came between you? Yes, that is a man's way of thinking. She would not, if she saw another giving you the happiness which

she herself can give no longer. Oh, trust me to know! It is your happiness she longs for, more, far more, than your love—*for she was a loving woman.*"

"The thought is treachery," Griff answered stubbornly.

"Your life is treachery, for it is less than it might be. See, I am quite an elderly matron now, and I can talk to you"—the girlish dimples showed once again—"and I want to ask you—have wanted ever since you came to see me that snowy morning—what will Lostwithens do when you are gone? You have toiled to win it from the heath—for what? There will be no son to follow you, and it will go back to the barren moor again."

Greta was unburdening herself to good purpose, and, knowing it, she persevered.

"What will come to the Manor House?" she went on ruthlessly. "There have been Lomaxes there—why, always, I think—and straight, big sons have followed straight, big fathers and kept the name alive."

This also was true, and Griff was touched in the weakest place in all his gospel of living for one's own strong hand alone. Stronger than love of toil, or fight, or women, was this passion of the moorward men for rearing sons to old inheritance; and the Lomaxes, more than any family of the moor, had known the pride of fatherhood.

"The Manor must go to strangers; so must Lostwithens," he said, in a harsh voice. "I am the last of the breed."

Yet she knew that, strive as he might, her words would return to him as he worked up yonder—would return again and yet again, until, perhaps, the scales would be lifted at last from those absorbed grey eyes of his, and he would understand.

"Gabriel has told you of the stranger I brought home? You spoke of her at Trawdon, if you remember," he said, after a silence broken only by the shouts of Greta's youngster as he chased a trout upstream with the vague hopefulness of inexperience.

"Yes. Is she—is she bonnie?"

The serious woman of a while since was just a curious lassie now, and Griff laughed at her eagerness.

"You would call her so, I think. Poor lass! She is so weak that she has no strength to cross the moor even, and yet Gabriel came to me one night with the request that I should turn her out of doors."

"Yes, Gabriel would," the other assented, with a smile peculiar to her when she thought of Gabriel's extravagances. "Look at the boy yonder, Mr. Lomax—sometimes he thinks that I, and the boys, and all that makes up life, are just so many temptations which are sent to kill his soul. Ah, but he does not often think so now, for I will not let him. And this stranger? Is not Lostwithens cold and bleak for her?"

"She seems content, and she shall stay until she is well enough to despise her shelter," said Griff, with needless bitterness. "Greta, how is it that folk cannot live their own lives as they will? I trouble no man about the ordering of his life; why should the gossips have any say as to the guests I choose to entertain?"

"Ah, father spoke of it just now, I see, when you went for the meal," said Greta, with quick intuition. "Well, there *is* gossip, of course, since the night when Squire Daneholme's keepers surprised your secret. What does it matter?"

"For myself, nothing at all; but—but she comes of a proud stock—"

"And is she ashamed, do you think?"

"Ashamed? Not she. There's no such thing as shame out yonder; the sky's too clean, and the moor too big."

"Then let the gossip die of starvation. Of course," she added, the dimples showing themselves again, "you could not live that kind of life in Ling Crag here; but it is different at Lostwithens. Why, every legend of the countryside seems to gather round your moor—the moor which frightened me so when first we came here from the south. Ricroft and the Lonely Folk fought there;

Waynes and Ratcliffes fought there; and none interfered. Why, surely, there's no law—except God's—can run at Lostwithens?"

Greta's eyes were bright, for the staunch tales of unforgotten feuds were dear to her. At her first coming to Ling Crag they had seemed as monstrous and as terrifying as the moor itself; but little by little she had learned to love both the heath and the lore that sprang from it—tough, stubborn lore, bearing goodly blossom in its season, like the ling.

The mare began to fidget, eager to be off, but Griff did not heed her.

"Greta," he said suddenly, "you were always able to turn a man's black moods aside. If I stay here much longer I shall begin to—dream dreams again," he ended.

"Dream what you call dreams—spend your whole life in dreaming them. Oh, if you knew, if I could tell you, that such dreams are real, real! Come back to us, Mr. Lomax. You can dig, can you not? Well, dig a hole—a deep, wide hole—up yonder at Lostwithens, and put your troubles into it, and hide them away for ever."

She was smiling, but her voice vibrated, and her eyes were eager. Greta, though she could not preach like her husband, had the rarer gift of seeing a man's heart, of finding words to touch it; yet she was not able to guess how wide and deep must be the grave which could cover all Griff's troubles.

"Good-bye, Greta," he said, with the abruptness he had shown all through their talk. "I shall take the thought of your happiness back with me, at any rate."

"You can make me happier, if you will. Did you ever know a happy wife who did not want to give her recipe to others?"

Griff turned, with one foot in the stirrip. "You shall be the first to know of my conversion," he said, with grim enjoyment of his irony.

As she watched him down the path, the meal-bag swaying clumsily behind him, Greta was well satisfied.

She had seen the change which the last few weeks had wrought in Griff; he was more ready to show anger, quicker to respond to suggestions of fellowship and home; and the change had come, she told herself with a happy laugh, since he had found a stranger-woman in the snow and brought her to his hut.

Griff himself, meanwhile, was riding up the stony rise of Water Lane, and beneath the unrest and doubt of self, which intercourse with friends of other days rarely failed to bring, there was a quiet, insistent voice that said it would be pleasant to get back to Lostwithens and find his guest there to welcome him.

He was not free yet, however; Ling Crag village lay before him, and at the door of Ephraim Shackleton's cottage stood Betty o' th' Nab, who had been a maid at the time of the great snow, who had found a goodman after a funeral, and was now secure in a wedlock which gave Ephraim cause for thought upon occasion.

"Good-day to you, Mr. Lomax," said Betty, standing with folded arms and an air which bespoke the new pride of possession. "The last time I saw you was at the burying. Ephraim was lonely-like then, but I'm a rare comforter, he says."

Little as he troubled himself about his neighbour's affairs, it startled him when he realised that a man could so soon forget one wife as to find another before two months of mourning had passed. Then, careful as he was in these latter days to judge no man, he put the thought away from him; some men are fashioned so by nature, and perhaps, after all, the sincerity of grief was not to be measured by a month, or a twelvemonth, or a life, of mourning.

"So you make him happy?" he said, reining in his horse and smiling in his own grave way.

"Happy? Well, not as men reckon happiness, for 'twould be no ways good for him. I don't cosset him, if that's what you mean; I don't let him go wasting health and strength at the Eagle; I don't kneel me

down and pull off his boots when he comes in from the farm. That's what men mean by wedded happiness, but it's not my meaning. Ephraim doesn't seem to like it much—the first one spoilt him bonnily—but by and by he'll know it's all for the best."

It was clear that Ephraim, if he had made an over-hasty bargain, was in a fair way to reap his punishment; and Griff, with a nod and a good-bye, was gathering tight the reins again when Betty o' th' Nab put in the sly speech to which the rest had been a preamble.

"Seems as if wedlock were catching," she observed, her bold eyes resting on Griff's face. "They tell me you are thinking of it, since you found something out at Wynyates Kirk."

Griff's face grew hard, but Betty o' th' Nab was too witless to know what lay beneath the calm front of this man whom Ling Crag named "fairy-kist," and she followed the bent of her love for half-malicious gossip.

"It's queer, come to think of it," she went on; "yond snow that seemed so fearsome brought a lot of good things to the moor. I found a husband, and you, 'twould seem, found—"

It was five years since Griff had lost his temper, but he lost it now, with a thoroughness that harked back to the unregenerate days.

"Look you, Betty o' th' Nab," he broke in, "you can go to the devil, and none to miss you, but if you lay your tongue to another lie of that sort, by God, I'll cut it out with the thong-end of my whip."

The storm passed as speedily as it had come. Griff's face, wild with fury for the moment, was passionless and calm again. He touched the mare with his heel, and he and she were over the hill and down the slack before Betty o' th' Nab could find her wits again.

"Begow, I've heard tell of his temper as a lad," she muttered, "and he's not bettered it, I reckon. Sakes! may I never again see a man's face strike cold and hot at the same time, as his did! I'll be getting in to Ephraim,

and ease myself a bit by asking him how much he spent in liquor yester even."

Griff rode steadily forward, the unrest gaining on him with every stride. It seemed that, whenever he ventured out of sanctuary and mixed at all with his fellows, he was destined to have his outlook—his sane outlook, as he thought—distorted, mocked, shown naked under the sun-glare of the world he shunned. He would not think of Greta's counsel, which had roused the old instincts in him; he would not recall the memories brought to life by Hazel Dene; he would not admit that he had turned aside by a hair's-breadth from the road which he had chosen. He looked to right and left as the mare, mindful of her stable and the rack of hay, made forward merrily. He saw the wide, strong, steadfast land; and he told himself, squaring his shoulders to the wind, that a man could live his life alone, if need were, and make it worthier than was possible among the chattering, drifting folk who found unrest and named it life.

Yet his face softened when he reached Lostwithens. The companionship he had shunned so long, thinking it a beguilement and a curse, was waiting for him at the lower gate; and he was glad when he saw Mrs. Nethercliff, her slim hands resting on the topmost bar, her face alight with welcome.

Against her better judgment, against all promptings of reserve, she had come down to look for his return. The day had been long without him; she had been surprised into little gusts of fear concerning his safety; and so, when he dismounted, she held out both hands to him impulsively, and he took them close into his own, and the trouble seemed to leave his face as water leaves the upland pools when sun and warm west wind come with the summer.

She saw that her welcome had not gone for naught, and she was glad, feverishly glad, to know that, though to-morrow he would toil and sweat in grim aloofness, he

could to-day find comfort in her presence. She lost the years of tiredness; her face grew young and happy; the hazel eyes shone soft and bright.

Griff still held her hands. "Little comrade," he said, "it is good to find you here."

CHAPTER XVI

QUIET DAYS BEFORE THE STORM

THE weeks went by, and still Lostwithens was sanctuary to Nell Nethercliff. The outer world, which after her first coming to the hut had seemed to press in upon them, had left herself and Griff in solitude again. Squire Daneholme did not fulfil his promise, given on the night of the poaching raid, to ride over; Gabriel Hirst forbore remonstrance, though he yearned to cross the heath and offer counsel such as Griff had constantly rejected; no poacher had sought the well-known refuge offered by Lostwithens; no keepers had come knocking at the door in search of runaways. Farmer Royd, moreover, had got the better of his ailment, and Griff had no need to go abroad into the human paths where he found such unrest and perplexity.

Lostwithens was lonely once again, as it had been before the coming of Nell Nethercliff. Its remoteness from the world was as of old, yet in its desolation there was a subtle difference which puzzled Griff. Instead of two wayfaring folk—himself and Trash—who had found a resting-place here, there were three; instead of sleeping on heather in the hut, he slept on straw in the laithe; these, outwardly, were the only changes in his life, but underneath there was a change more vital, to which Griff could give neither name nor meaning. For Mrs. Nethercliff had adapted herself, as if by instinct, to the altered fashion of her days: the details of farm labour and of intake toil, the varying aspects of the heath as

spring advanced, the freedom from those frets and heart-aches and complexities which are of man's making, not of God's—these were the forces which had brought her peace, had lifted a little of the weakness from her, had cleansed already the one-half of her sordid memories.

No wonder that she accepted the new life, loving it for the gift of healing that it had, telling herself day by day that on the morrow—or the morrow's morrow—she must go out again into the world, and forgetting, as each sunset made a glory of the heath, that she had need to think of leaving Lostwithens. She had even asked Hester to teach her something of the cookery which, in a rough way, Griff understood so well; and Hester, jealous as she was of the supplanter, was touched by the shy and gentle manner in which Mrs. Nethercliff proffered her request, as if she doubted her own worthiness to learn.

The lessons bore good fruit. Mrs. Nethercliff was eager to do something, however slight, in return for the kindness Griff had shown her, and only in this way could she save him labour. So, little by little, Griff awoke to the fact that his meals were waiting for him nowadays when he came in hungry after his morning bath or tired at the end of long hours of digging. He scarcely noticed it at first—and Nell Nethercliff, in her weakness, shed tears of grief when she saw his unheeding acquiescence—but presently he found himself thinking that it was good to be cared for in these matters. Yet it was not this alone which caused the change in his life at Lostwithens, the change which so perplexed him; there was another factor, and one more potent, in the altered outlook.

Heretofore, when he had finished work in seasons of short days and long, dark evenings, he had had leisure to sit beside the hearth, with only Trash to talk to, and only his thoughts for company when the dog grew tired of chat and settled into slumber. And in those thoughts had lain his danger. If he were over weary, his brain

would force him back to memories which should have been forbidden; he would live again in that wild week which had set his life adrift; he would see himself, an honest man no longer, labouring to his utmost, but an outcast who left a stain on every hand he took in fellowship. At other times—this was when he had taxed his strength, great as it was, beyond all human limits—he would know the dreads felt by his fathers in the days when the moor ran red with blood-feuds, when Barguest and the Sorrowful Woman, gnomes and the Heath-Brown Man, had fixed their spell upon the land and made the men, who in the daytime fought staunchly against mortal foes, fall to trembling at gloaming-tide for dread of ghostly visitants. Such moods were rare with Griff; but when they came, they left him weak, shattered, and ashamed; and the little hut, which had seen him win his way to peace, had seen him also shrink —a coward, knowing his own shame—from the primeval dreads.

All this was altered now. When evening fell, and he had washed himself at the brown pool on the moor, he found a cheery fire awaiting him, a meal, a comrade. The meal finished, he would seat himself upon the settle which, in these latter days, he had fashioned out of odds and ends of board, and would light his pipe; and Nell Nethercliff, from her chair at the far side of the hearth, would smile across at him—pleased as a child still with the homely comfort of her life—and would talk of happier things than Barguest or the wages earned by sin.

Griff's very aspect changed. A softer light shone through the steady purpose of his face; he laughed at times with something of the old light-heartedness. It was as if this late-born spring, which had come to loose the moor from bondage, was breaking up the frost that had held, not peat and marsh alone, but the man's heart. And Greta's prophecy fulfilled itself—for again and again there came to him in these last days the thought of wife and children.

Yet in one thing he did not waver. His thoughts throughout the working day dwelt constantly upon that patch of heath which he had still to rescue; he was thrilled, as of old, by the feel of the spade in his hands, by the sight of the upturned clods; for he looked beyond the present, and saw green crops bend curtseying to the breeze on this same soil where now he worked.

"Surely you should spare yourself a little?" Mrs. Nethercliff said once—it was an evening of late April, cool and sweet, and he had come in after a hard day's trenching—had come in wet from without, and wet from within, his face all lined and tense with overwork.

"I cannot," he said, half wearily, half eagerly. "The land gets stonier with every spade-breadth, and I have more than an acre still to finish before the year is out."

"But if you kill yourself meanwhile? What does an acre matter? It will keep until another year."

"Call it fancy, if you will," said Griff, smiling at her earnestness. "I have set myself a certain task to do—and it is near the end—and this fancy tells me that I shall find real peace when once the work is done."

He turned his eyes toward the window and looked out lovingly upon his land. The woman watched him, as she often did at such times, wondering what tragedy could have laid the foundation of his present life. Often and often, as they sat beside the peats and talked, she had been sure that he must tell her his story as plainly as she had told hers; but no confession came. He was ready to gossip of the old days, to talk of the details of his work, even at rare intervals to fall into passionate lover's praise of the moor whose witchery was meat and drink to him; beyond that there was reserve, cold, watchful, not to be betrayed. To-night, for the first time, he had forgotten himself, had spoken his thoughts aloud, perhaps, rather than confided in his companion.

"What does it mean?" the woman asked herself.

"The life brought him peace, he always said before; but now he talks of *real* peace, as if—ah, but he has suffered long ago! He must have suffered to breaking-point. How if my own troubles are little by the side of his?"

The thought comforted her in some odd way; then, with another glance at the silent figure lost in dreams of land-winning, a sudden gust of impatience swept over her.

"He has forgotten how *to feel*," she murmured, knowing, yet not caring, that she missed the truth. "It is true that he just grows out of the peat, like the ling and the bracken. He tells his tales to the wind—but not to me."

And then she laughed at her outburst, for she was as full of waywardness in these last days as was the wind to whom she grudged Griff's confidence. Griff heard the laugh, and turned.

"Oh, it is nothing," she said. They were learning to answer unspoken questions, these two. "Nothing at all, except that it seems droll to see you standing there and wishing that the days would lengthen and let you kill yourself a little faster."

"You are full of fancies still—and yet last night you talked of leaving Lostwithens."

"You have begun to trade on what you call my weakness. I tell you, I am strong, and, indeed—oh, indeed, I must leave you very soon."

Her tone was eager, with the eagerness of one who claims denial. Time after time she had tried to be firm, yet had always realised, with a sudden clearness that was almost terror, what such separation would mean to her. So quietly, so slowly, she had drifted into peace, that not till lately had she understood what now was desperately sure; Lostwithens stood for "home" to her, and the world beyond it was a friendless waste from which she shrank.

"You will leave when you are well, since you are bent on leaving," said Griff, in answer to the vehemence which

scarcely cloaked the other's weakness. "Meanwhile, we're forgetting supper, lassie, and that is ill-treatment for a starving man."

Her heart beat softly, happily. This man, with the big body and untiring arms, could be strangely gentle; his words were few enough at all times, with little in them to a stranger's ear, perhaps, but Mrs. Nethercliff, hearing the kindly voice, seeing the kindly eyes, was glad that even yet he treated her as a good comrade-child, who had come to lighten solitude for him. Since that impulsive greeting which had passed between them on his return from Hazel Mill—when he had taken both her hands in his and named her "little comrade"—they had entered, so it seemed, into new intimacy of thought and speech, and not all his rugged earnestness touching his intake could rob her of the knowledge that his face brightened whenever she sought him out, whenever he found her waiting for him at supper-time or at the hour of breaking fast.

The board was spread already, and the three of them sat down; for Trash, like a guest who knew his welcome sure, sat gravely on his haunches between his friends and received his food from each impartially. The light still held when they had done, for Griff had finished a trench sooner than he had expected, and had made a holiday of the two hours or so that remained of daylight.

"Let us go up the moor," he said.

It was growing to be a habit with them, this quiet evening stroll among the heather. Sometimes, when Griff worked until the edge of dark, they would walk by the light of moon or stars; but the hour which Mrs. Nethercliff loved best was that which came, as now, between the sun's farewell and the first footsteps of the dusk.

Together, in friendly, satisfying silence, they walked up the rambling western track, and the eyes of both were full of wonder and of awe as they watched the pageant of the day fade into slumber. The sky was

marvellously soft, laying its dainty gauze—blue, primrose, tenderest crimson—upon the dark, rude line of moor. Bouldsworth Hill, round-shouldered as a bulky greybeard whose back is bending to the years, rose from the middle of the heath, his head showing a softened comeliness against the sky. Behind them the white moon was riding upon air, a fairy lantern come to light a fairy world. Sound there was none, save the cry of a grouse, the wailing of a curlew, the crisp, yet fluttering, note that rang from the bells of last year's ling when the wind played through its belfries.

Moor and sky were utterly at peace, and Nell Nethercliff, glancing now and then at her companion, would meet his eyes and read there the reflection of her own quiet thoughts. The large content, the glamour, the knowledge that they were walking far from men in a land where heart and mind were free to roam with the wind—these things were of the stuff her girlhood's dreams had woven from the threads of fantasy—and yet these things were real now, more real than the certainty that some day she must go her ways and know such hours as this no more.

"It is too good, too good," she murmured, and a little fear crept in, chilling her content. It seemed as if Fate must grudge her this one perfect hour, given her, it might be, to make the after-reckoning bitterer when it came.

Griff did not catch the words, but he saw that she was shivering.

"We will turn, child," he said. "The wind is over cold for you."

"No, no!" she pleaded. "Let us go on and on. We shall surely never see a night like this again; we dare not waste a moment of it." And then she laughed, very softly, as her way was. "You are right," she said. "I am just a child—or how could I suggest our going 'on and on,' as if we lived in a fairy tale?"

They had come to the naked bulk of stone where once, tradition said, a Wayne had killed a Ratcliffe during the

long feud, and Mrs. Nethercliff clutched Griff's arm as she saw a girl's figure leaning with her face against the stone.

"It is Hester, surely!" she whispered. "What is she doing here at this hour? and—see, she is sobbing as if her heart would break."

Hester, absorbed in her grief, had not heard their footsteps on the silent peat, nor had she any care for the glory of the gloaming heath. Her sobs sounded low and deep across the quiet moor, and once she clenched her hands and cried aloud. "O God, if it had been he instead!" was the cry, exceeding bitter. "I would have been glad—glad!"

"We will go," said Griff, in the hushed voice of one who stands in a sickroom.

They turned and went; and glancing westward down the moor, Griff saw the loose figure of Ned o' Bracken Clough come striding jauntily across the ling. It was the first moment of awakening to him, and he recalled with sudden vividness that prophecy of Gabriel Hirst's which he had laughed aside. What meaning Hester's cry had, he could not guess; but Nell Nethercliff had read it by the light of what had gone before. Hester's tears, she knew, were all on Griff's account; and a quick jealousy, followed by a numb sense of foreboding, crept over her. The moon still shone above her fairy kingdom; the wind's breath was fragrant as before; an equal glamour lay about the long, deep gullies of the heath, fast filling now with the mystical, rare purple of the gloaming; but fear was walking hand in hand with Nell Nethercliff. She seemed to look into the future; she could not rid herself of the premonition that the weeping figure up yonder at the Feud Stone would, in one way or another, play havoc with her life—not directly, to be sure, for she knew, and found comfort in the knowledge, that Hester had never stirred the pulses of the man beside her.

Their homeward way led them past the grave of her

child, which Griff had long since marked with a rude cross of oak. Mrs. Nethercliff forgot her forebodings for a while; she remembered all the kindness shown to her, kindness of which this simple grave was one memorial; the moonlight lay so tranquilly upon the boy's resting-place, moreover, and the wind lingered about it with such tender playfulness, that it seemed right, somehow, and fitting, that he should lie here secure and unafraid.

"Tell me," she said softly, "how came you to understand—on that far-away night when you carried us through the snow—to understand the things that save me pain?"

"I lost a boy of my own once," Griff answered.

She looked quickly at him, almost with reproof; but she checked her first impulsive query. So he had known the love of wife and child, this man whose heart had seemed given to the moor; often as she had sought for an answer to the riddle of his life, not once had she thought of him as one who in the past had been intimate with the softer claims of home; his whole outlook, his absorption in his labour, seemed in themselves a denial of such a past. Yet now—yet now—how cold the moor was, how bleak the moonlight on the little grave, though a moment since it had been warm and kindly. This was the wall, then, which again and again had reared itself between them as they shared the peat-warmth of the hut; he could be kind, carelessly tender even on occasion, but the best of him was in another woman's keeping.

"Let us go home," she said quietly. "I am tired."

It was the same pathetic cry which she had given when pride and will were first conquered by her weakness; and, indeed, the weariness of body which returned so suddenly to her just now was real as the weariness and desolation of her heart.

Henceforth Lostwithens could no longer be quite the refuge that it had been; she would know that she was shut out—yes, "shut out" was the phrase that kept

recurring—from the inner comradeship which she had longed for, and had sometimes seemed to find.

In silence they went down the slope; and Nell Nethercliff did not let herself come face to face with questions which, for all that, lay close in wait for her. What was the meaning of this new grief? If they were to be good comrades—and surely, surely she needed nothing more than comradeship — why should the thought of this other woman hurt and mock her? Above all, why had she no power of will, even now, to leave Lostwithens? These were the questions she would have to meet one day—but not to-night. Oh, not to-night! She was too tired.

Griff, for his part, was thinking of that scene at the Feud Stone, and hoping against hope that Ned o' Bracken Clough would prove better than his reputation warranted. It was not only that Hester was too upright, too clean of heart and mind, to be a plaything; there was her father to be thought of, and Joshua Royd, he knew, would rather a girl of his found death than shame.

"I am fanciful," he muttered. "The lass has quarrelled with Ned, and they'll be making it up again by now. That was the reason of her tears, which were half temper likely. Ned has made mistakes, like all of us, but he is in earnest about Hester; he's always wanted her, since she stood table-high."

Yet Gabriel Hirst, walking with Greta at that moment in their garden at Ling Crag, could have enlightened him. The moon shone as clearly on the preacher's garden as on Lostwithens, lighting the auriculas, the London Pride, the ladslove bushes rich with their first spring sweetness; but neither man nor wife paid heed to the homely beauty of the place.

Greta, always ready to take other people's burdens, had surprised Hester's secret. The two, though they met but seldom, had a liking for each other, and on the last Marshcotes market-day Hester had called for a cup of tea as she returned through Ling Crag village.

The girl looked altered, Greta thought, and one hint of sympathy had brought a sudden rush of tears, a wild confession, and afterwards a return of pride, mingled with a recklessness which troubled Greta almost more than the confession itself. Since then the preacher's wife had set herself to better an ill business; she had taken counsel with her husband, not from any liking for repetition of a secret confided to her keeping, but because she hoped that Gabriel, strong to help at all times, however he might err in judgment, would find a way of rescue.

Gabriel, forgetting the tacit enmity between himself and Hester, had done his best; and to-night he was telling Greta how he had crossed to Bracken Clough, had spoken with Ned, and had come home empty of comfort as he went.

"As well plough the peat as try to move Ned," he was saying. "The man has heart enough, wastrel as he is, but he shifts with every wind, and has an answer ready to his tongue whenever you seek to saddle blame on him."

"Perhaps—perhaps you talked Scripture over freely," said Greta hesitatingly.

"No, lass, no. I remembered his carelessness in the things of faith, and I forebore to tempt him into mockery or anger. I pleaded with him, reminded him of the punishment for sins unredeemed—ay, I even showed him, as best I might, that Hester would brighten his home for him—though I found it hard in the saying, since I always feared the lass was too headstrong and too free of her own will."

"And would Ned answer nothing?"

"Answer? Yes, he had answers, as I told you. He was not the man to make a wife content; his ways were not a home-bird's ways; he would weary a wife to death if he had one, and it was best to let ill alone, for fear of making it worse. And yet he seems to be fond of her, and to be sorry. Nay, Greta, nay, I've

known bad folk, and good folk, and folk that were just in the middlings, as you might say; but I never was so puzzled by a man as by Ned o' Bracken Clough."

"I know," said Greta, pressing a little closer to his side with a sense that this husband of hers, though he was stern at times and void of humour, was steady as the hills themselves. "Poor Ned! It is no use, Gabriel, being angry, or ashamed, or anything but pitiful when Ned's doings are in case. He is so ready to follow his mood, and cannot count the cost, either to himself or others."

"You are gentle with him, lass," said the preacher grimly. "All women are, I notice—and most men, for that matter. Yet this is no boy's lightness, Greta; it may damn two souls, and of a certainty it will kill Joshua Royd. Nay, you must not plead for him, Greta."

She pressed yet closer to him and lifted her bonnie eyes to his under the moon-bright sky.

"Cannot you understand, my dear?" she said, in a voice that thrilled him now as it had done years ago when he wooed her down by Hazel Mill. "Cannot you understand that I find it hard to think amiss of anyone, now that I have you—you and the boys? Gabriel, my life's so full of love that the sinners and the unhappy folk *must* have a share of it."

Gabriel Hirst was stern no longer; he listened to his heart for once—a heart which, unrepressed, beat high and passionate and strong as any man's about the moorside. He took her to him, and kissed the upturned face, and talked as hot young lovers talk on moonlit nights of spring.

"My lass, my lass!" he murmured, when at last he set her free.

"But, dear, I'm a lass no longer," said Greta, with that pretty matron's coquetry which sits so winsomely upon the good and happy woman. "Tell me, cannot you see the years come creeping quietly across my face? And the wrinkles—"

He kissed the words away, and she, looking up into the steady eyes, the eager lover's face, thanked God, as she did each night upon her knees, for giving her a husband such as this.

"Now I am going in," she said. "It is your night for getting Sunday's sermon ready, and I—Gabriel dear, will you let charity and great forgiveness of our fellows be the beginning, and the middle, and the end, of that good sermon?"

He nodded a grave acquiescence; for Greta had taught him, was still teaching him, to seek on the fringe of the clouds of wrath that silver lining of forbearance which to her was hope, and faith, and life itself.

Yet Gabriel Hirst, though he went out into the moor, as of old, and sought his inspiration from the hills, could not think of his sermon. His thoughts recurred, do as he would, to Hester and to Ned o' Bracken Clough. And then, as often chanced with this man of the untamed heart and upward-striving soul, he recalled the late scene in the garden, when he had felt that his wife was the dearest thing to him on either side of the grave; and he shuddered, fearing that his love was idolatrous. So it was ever with Gabriel; the same outgoing of the natural man was followed always by reaction, and at these times he saw the healthy springs of life grow foul and tainted at their source.

Up and down the moor he went, and the fever in his soul—a fever which usually was turned into the useful channel of exhortation—fixed itself upon his own wrong-doings, upon his neighbour's sins. He remembered all the men and women who had shared Ned's sin and Hester's; and he remembered, too, the peril of that friend who dwelt at Lostwithens, and who had lately brought a strange woman to sit at meat with him. Unbalanced, hot to save, the preacher saw his duty clear, or fancied that he saw it so. These two were sinless yet; at all hazards he must keep them so.

Down and up, up and down the waste of ling he walked,

and finally he found his plan matured. To-morrow he would cross to Lostwithens, and would say his say, if God willed that Griff should be absent from the hut; and in their own despite these two might yet be saved.

And so he went home again, spent and weary; and he did not guess that this plan of his, born of sincere self-communing, was to bring disaster perilously close to the man and the woman whom he sought to serve.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMPTY HUT

HESTER came early to Lostwithens on the next morning, for it was the day on which she made Griff's butter for him. She showed little trace of the grief which yesternight had racked her at the Feud Stone; but Griff noticed that there was a sullenness in the dark face which was new to it. The girl, moreover, had not entered the hut, as was her custom, to pass the time of day with Mrs. Nethercliff and the master, but had gone straight to the dairy, where Griff found her busy with a pan of cream.

The scene was one to linger in a man's memory, so fragrant, cool, and bright the place was, with the morning sun shining through the window in level, yellow bands of light, with the cream-pans lying side by side, all empty now save this last vessel from which Hester had withdrawn the plug. For a moment Griff did not speak, but stood in the doorway, watching the lass as she moved with natural grace about the dairy, her round arms bared above the elbow. After she had drawn off what milk remained beneath the cream, after the cream itself had been forced through into a fresh receptacle and had been added to the contents of the deep earthenware vessel which already held the fruits of six days' milk, she turned to the door for the first time and saw Griff standing there. Her eyes fell before his; she could not speak at first, until she had fought down the lump that was rising in her throat.

"Why, Hester, you never came to say good-morning," cried Griff. "What have we done to be treated so shabbily?"

His tone was bantering, for last night's suspicions were driven away entirely, and he could laugh at his own fears for the girl's happiness. Was she not the same Hester he had known, lissom and upright, full of the pleasant business of making yellow cream into butter golden as the kingcups?

"I—I had to get through the churning as soon as might be," Hester faltered. "Father is badly-like again, and he'll need me as soon as ever I can win away."

"What is amiss?" asked Griff, as he helped her to rear the cream-pot to the edge of the churn and pour in its contents.

"The old trouble—just a faintness that comes over him so that he can't stand for a while; then it passes off, but it leaves him weak, and he was so bad this morning that I ran across to Sykeholme Farm and sent one of the lads on horseback for the Marshcotes doctor."

"You should have stayed with him, lass."

"And left you with a week's cream on your hands, all to go sour and be given to the pigs? Nay, father would not listen to it at all. 'A man can make shift somehow,' he said to me, 'but cream won't bide. Just don your shawl, and off you go to Lostwithens, and remember we owe more to Mr. Lomax and his father than ever we can pay.' So here I am, and, in a way of speaking, it's time I got to work."

Griff left her at the churn, then stood, half-way between the dairy and the hut, and looked down toward his intake. He had meant to have a long day with spade and pick, and yet he could not bring himself to it, now that he knew how hardly things were going with Farmer Royd. The old man at all times made too light of these attacks of his, and to-day, Griff knew, he would be forcing himself to get through the appointed tasks as if his strength were that of ten or twenty years ago. Then,

too, the farmer's insistence on the claims of gratitude, his refusal to let Hester stay at home, were eloquent of the man's finest traits.

"Nay, I can't let him shift for himself up yonder," Griff muttered, as he went into the hut.

Mrs. Nethercliff was putting away the breakfast things, with all the air of one who had long been used to such occupations.

"Did you find Hester? Or has she not come to-day?" she asked.

"Yes, she is in the dairy. Her father is ill again, and I must go up to Windy Farm. Don't expect me before nightfall, lassie, for there may be a good deal to do up there."

Her face fell a little, for she was apt to be restless and ill at ease when the hut was empty, at dinner-time, of the big, silent man who seemed to fill it. Then she remembered how good it was for him to have some such break as this between the days of his own work—the work which was too hard for him.

"We will dine at seven to-night, and pretend that we are living in the old days," she laughed.

"If you can get Trash to agree; he has a weakness for the mid-day meal."

"Oh, but you must take him with you. The poor beast gets so few scampers, and I shall be safe with Hester here."

"No," said Griff, in the tone she rarely disobeyed. "Hester will be leaving early, and you shall not be left alone."

So he saddled the mare and set off alone for Windy Farm, Trash following him with wistful eyes as he made up the moor. Farmer Royd was crossing, as it chanced, between the mistal and the house when Griff arrived, and he looked in wonderment at his visitor.

"Why, what's this?" he cried. "'Tis as fair a day for labouring in the soil as ever I saw, and yet you're idling, Mr. Lomax."

"I came to help you through, Joshua. My bit of ground will keep till another day."

"Nay, now, has Hester been bringing some fancy tale to you? There's nought ails me, and only a lass's whimsy would have bidden her send all the way to Marshcotes for a doctor."

Yet even as he spoke the old man swayed, and was glad to lean for a moment against his companion.

"It's nothing," he repeated, after a moment's pause for breath. "There's no need at all for you to stay, Mr. Lomax, no need at all; and I've naught so much to do —just three stone of potatoes to set, and the beasts to milk at even, and—"

"You'll do nothing but watch me work to-day, Joshua," put in the other. "By the look of you, Hester was right, and you'd be best in bed."

"When I take to my bed," said the farmer, his slow smile appearing for a moment, "when I take to my bed, I'll have to be carried there, for I'll never go of myself—not till the day's work is over."

"Has the doctor been?"

"What, Doctor Reddhiough? Nay, not yet, and I'd as lief be without him as with him. It's not doctor's stuff that will physic my sort of ailment."

Griff, looking closely at him, saw in the lined old face an expression as new to it as Hester's sullenness had been to hers. There was much sorrow to be read there, and, behind the sorrow, a haunting dread; and it was clear that physical pain was the outcome, not the cause, of Joshua's ailment.

Soon they were at work, however, for Royd must do his little to help with the potato-planting, if it were only to hand the sets to Griff as he moved down the sandy trenches. Then, after they had finished, there was this and that to be done about the farm—such odds and ends as come to fill in every corner of a working-day upon the uplands. It was only when they went indoors, and

sat them down for a pipe and a brew of tea and rum, that the farmer's spirits flagged.

"I'm getting older," he said quietly, as he stretched himself with a sigh on the lang-settle.

"Well, we all do, Joshua; but, man, you're good for many a busy year to come."

"Not now. I'd thought once—ay, thought right up to last Sabbath day—that I would like to live and see my bairn's bairns shooting up; but I don't want it now. I'd liefer die than live, and that's a sickness neither Doctor Reddhiough nor another can find a way to cure."

"What's on your mind, Joshua?" said the other gently.

For the first time in their long acquaintance Griff saw shiftiness in the farmer's honest eyes.

"Nay, there's naught," he said; "I'm not just strong, and what with the lambs, and the dappled cow in calf, and one thing and another, the farm like as it seems to get too much for me. That's all I have on my mind, lad; what else should there be?"

They smoked in friendly silence for a while, and the farmer, as he gazed into the peats, seemed to be taking counsel with himself. At last he looked up, and his eyes were shifty no longer.

"Mr. Lomax," he said, "it's never been my way to tell a lie—no, not even when I'm bargaining. For sixty years and odd I've said the thing that was true according to my lights, and it's over late to take to new ways now. Well, then, I *have* something on my mind—something that will stop me from ever gladdening again to see the sun shine on a crumbly furrow."

Again Griff's thoughts went back to the figure leaning against the Feud Stone, and he rose, and went to the window, and looked out, so that Farmer Royd might tell his tale with less disquiet. Royd, however, would have none of this.

"Sit you down again," he said harshly, pointing with

his pipe-stem to the big chair opposite. "The tale will be known through all the length and breadth of Ling Crag and Marshcotes by and by, and the sooner I get to looking honest men in the face, the better it will be for me."

He waited until Griff was seated, then caught his breath a little and went on bravely.

"It's about Hester, and it's said in few words, lad, or in none at all. And when I tell you that I want to find the man who wedded her in the Green Church, without a parson, you'll not be needing to know why I'm shamed, and old, and heart-broken."

Griff's worst fears had not been so black as the reality. He did not know what to say, nor yet how to keep silence, in face of the tragedy against which this worn old man was keeping so brave and dignified a front. Most piteous of all was the sad euphemism of the moor-folk which Joshua had used to shield his pride a little. Hester had been wedded in the Green Church! Ay, and many a bold-eyed wench could say the same who still was not fit to come near such a clean and upright lass as Joshua's.

It was characteristic of Griff that, once the first shock was over, he wasted no time on regret, but began busily to seek for some way of helping Royd to cover up his shame; it was characteristic of the outlook he had won from wind and sky that he had no thought of blame. It was not for him to judge another; he could not tell himself, as many a weaker man would have hastened to do, that, given kindred impulses, he would not have stumbled into equal trouble; but one thing he could do, knowing who the man was—he could go to Ned o' Bracken Clough and somehow bring him to a better mind.

"I want to find the man," Joshua went on, "because I've a fancy I should kill him, and feel the happier for it. I'm reckoned kindly, and I know I'm fond of everything that has four legs to it, and I never wronged any

man that I know of—no, nor struck one, save once when I saw a hulking Ling Crag chap kicking a horse he'd worked well-nigh to death—and him I knocked clean over the lowish bridge that crosses Wynyates Beck, and he fell with his head on a stone, and for a six-week it was doubtful whether he'd live or no. I didn't seem to care then, and that's how I feel now, lad. It's a fearful matter to kill a man; but I can't feel it in that way now. If I could only get Hester to speak—but her lips go tight, in a fashion I know, whenever I try to force her to tell me."

This was a new Joshua Royd who was speaking so dispassionately of a violence foreign to his nature. Yet the lines of his face were set, and his eyes were hard with purpose, and Griff knew that he might well keep his word.

"Best wait a while, and things will mend," said the younger man.

"How can that be? See you, Mr. Lomax, I'd lay no finger on him if he wedded her even now—but d'ye think the shame would not be there? You can smother the gossip of your neighbours—but what a man's heart knows, it knows, and naught will cover that."

In a flash Griff saw his own buried secret rise quick and lusty from its grave. His sin had not been Ned's sin, but surely, as Royd had said, his heart knew its shame. A warmer sympathy came to him; let Ned shirk plain issues as he would, he must in some way fasten responsibility upon him, for Hester's welfare and for Royd's.

"There's only two men the lass sees much of, and it puzzles me," went on the farmer, in the same matter-of-fact, quiet voice which emphasised the pathos of his situation. "You are one, and the sun will rise west instead of east when I let go my faith in you. T'other is Ned o' Bracken Clough. Well, he's not one as you might say to trust in some ways, but his heart is a good heart, and he's known and loved my lass ever since he

used to ride her pick-a-back as a bairn. Nay, 'tis not Ned; she does naught but flout him, and time and time I've gone so far as to wish she'd wed him and bring him into likelier ways."

Griff, perplexed, afraid lest his face should confess too much, was relieved to hear the farmyard gate flung back, and the tread of horse-hoofs on the litter, and the sound of Dr. Reddhiough's rough voice.

"Yond's Reddhiough," said Joshua listlessly. "He might as well have stayed away as come, for all the good he'll do."

Reddhiough waited only to hitch his horse to the ring beside the door, then stamped his way inside. A thick-set, smallish man he was, with a face as red as wind and rum could make it, and a breezy way with him which all but the weakest of his patients found heartsome and encouraging.

"Now, Joshua, what's amiss?" he said, helping himself from the bottle which Royd pushed towards him. "I couldn't get over before the afternoon, as I fancied there were some folk about the moor more sick than you, and so took them first. What, man, your pulse is feeble, I'll own, but no man's pulse keeps steady working-hours all days and every day; now, just open your vest—oh yes, you think it all foolery, but you've got to do it—so!"

The doctor rattled on as he thumped and sounded the patient, then nodded briskly and took a liberal pull at his glass.

"Feel a bit faint at times, eh? Have to sit down in a hurry now and again, with a feeling that the moor-top's slipping away from under you! Well, well, there's nothing to fret about unless you do too much at the farm-work. Yond's a fine upstanding lass of yours, Joshua; let her do all the milking for a while, and any bits of work she can; she's strong enough to stand it, and you aren't just now.—Eh! Can't take things quietly for a few days? Nonsense, Joshua, nonsense! Windy

Farm must look to itself for a time. I shall be passing this way to-morrow, and I'll look in with some physic.—Oh ay, and take your rum sparingly," he added, laughing, as he filled himself another half-tumbler. "Look at the light, not at the lantern, you know. I can stand it, and you can't at present."

Notwithstanding his prejudice against all doctors, Farmer Royd could not resist the breezy friendliness of Reddhiough. The man drank hard, undoubtedly; he rode up hill and down with a breakneck recklessness that argued anything but a careful brain behind a careful hand; he could bandy oaths, if need were, with the roughest hind upon the moor; yet his skill was great, and at the bedside, if apt to be a trifle noisy, still he was full of infinite patience and a tenderness which was the true core of his nature.

"Bless me," he went on, after he had chatted a while, "by the look of the sun it's time I was getting back to Marshcotes. Keep two things in mind, Joshua—don't work, and, above all, don't worry."

Griff saw him glance sharply at the farmer; it was plain that his shaft, "Don't worry," had not been thrown at random, plain that, by the intuition which in its way was genius, he had gathered the prime cause of the illness.

"You'll like me to stay and milk for you?" said Griff.

"Nay, lad, nay; Hester will have started from Lostwithens by this time, and she'll soon be here. Besides, I like as I couldn't bide to see another man milking, spite of what the doctor says, so long as I'm about. The kine know me, you see, and beasts are full of whimsies. Well, good-day to you, doctor, and thank you."

Griff, anxious for a word with the doctor, and remembering that Mrs. Nethercliff would be looking for his return, said good-bye to Royd and went out at the same time as Reddhiough. The practitioner and he were no strangers to each other, for they had been neighbours in the old Marshcotes days.

"I'll ride down the lane with you, and home by the Moss Haigh bridle-path, if you can wait for me to saddle," said Griff, when they found themselves alone.

"Right, Lomax! By the Heart, I've not seen you for years! They tell me you've chosen to live at the back end of nowhere. Lord, though, you have bettered yourself! You never had those muscles when I knew you—you always looked a trifle slack in the build, to tell you the truth—but now you're hard as a bit of oak. Get your nag saddled—it's not old Lassie, is it? No? I fancied she'd be dead by this time, though she was a game one to gallop even in her old age."

"It was I who killed her, I believe. Poor Lassie! I went a bit wild, you remember, Reddhiough, when the troubles came, and one night I rode her up and down the moor. seeking a man I wanted, until she dropped under me. That seemed to finish her, and a week after she died."

"Died licking your hand, I'll be bound, and thanking you for all your kindness," put in the doctor, with his rough laugh. "Womenkind are all alike, four-legged or two."

They had reached the stable, and Griff was already saddling. "Reddhiough, what do you think of Joshua Royd?" he asked, as soon as they had mounted and were going at a foot-pace down the lane.

"Think? I *know*, man. He's had two bouts of rheumatic fever in the last ten years, and more than one touch of pleurisy—these hilltop folk will never learn to change wet clothes—and now he's coming in for a trim little legacy of pains and penalties. Heart touched; he's got years of life yet if he takes care—and doesn't worry."

"That's just it," said Griff, with a touch of Royd's own impatience of advice; "but how is he to help worrying?"

"Ah, you know more than I do, then. What's the trouble with him?"

"I can't tell you that; but I am going to remove it if I can. See you, Reddhiough, I'm fond of the old man; is there anything—anything money could get him, you understand, in the way of comfort—"

"Nothing. I'm fond of Joshua myself, for he's about the best of a clean breed that ever I met, and that's saying something when I knew the moor-folk as a lad and have known them ever since. If money would do him any good, I'd dip into my pocket myself, and let the wife nag at me for a week in consequence; but it goes deeper than his body—that might pick up again if the worry were got over."

"It shall be," said Griff quietly.

Reddhiough looked up; he liked the self-contained assurance of this man whom he had known only as a hard rider, a hard fighter, yet light as a boy in his whims.

"You see, Lomax, these good folk call me clever," he said, after a while. "Well, it's precious little I knew of doctoring when I started, and all I know now I've learned by practice—devilish nice for my early patients, eh?—but I found out one secret at the beginning. It's worry, worry at the bottom of half folk's ailments; scotch the worry, and the disease takes care of itself, unless it's something stiff. I read worry in Joshua's face the first moment I set eyes on him."

Griff shook his horse into a canter, and they did not slacken pace again until they reached the uphill bit of track that opened on to the highway; and then their talk reverted to old times—those same old times which every chance meeting brought home to Griff again, as if to show him that the moorland intimacies, born of the fathers' and their fathers' intimacies, were not to be broken by any sternness of resolve to live apart. From Wyecollar to Cranshaw, from Bouldsworth to steep Marshcotes village, his very fibres were intertwined with those of the moor-dwellers; they knew him, knew the records of his race; he knew their histories, had supped

and raked and made merry with them; and to-day, as he listened to the remembered cheeriness of Reddhiough's talk, it came to him afresh that he might as well pluck out his heart as seek to nurse his loneliness through life. Stray thoughts of Greta and her counsel, fixed thoughts of Mrs. Nethercliff, who would now be waiting for him, ran through the ebb and flow of talk, until he found that the Moss Haigh bridle-path lay behind them, not before.

"Good-bye," he said, wheeling round his horse. "Some day I'll drop in and crack a bottle with you."

"Best do it now, unless you have better company waiting for you."

Griff, having learned wisdom, turned the jest aside with a laugh, though he saw that Reddhiough was hinting at Nell Nethercliff's presence at Lostwithens. "You always know the least tittle of moor-gossip. That's how you contrive to guess their worries and cure them. Good-bye; you'll find me knocking at your door before the summer's safely in."

"The sooner the better. Good-night."

Griff, soon as he had set off toward Lostwithens, fell into thoughts of Hester Royd again. For her own sake, for Ned's, he had been eager to find some way of rescue; but the doctor's certainty that Joshua's life depended on the issue made him doubly anxious. Round and about he twisted the matter, just as the preacher had done not long ago; none knew better than he—unless it were the ne'er-do-weel himself—what a shifting bog of waywardness was Ned o' Bracken Clough; none knew better that the man was tender-hearted as a child; the difficulty lay, not in appealing to Ned's heart, but in moving him to definite action.

At last—it was just as he was nearing the bridle-track which he had passed once already—an inspiration came to him. He laughed, and flicked the mare's ears with his whip; for, knowing Ned, he knew that his plan had a brave chance of success.

"It will be a fair match," he muttered, "and Ned always pays his debts when he can manage it."

He was just turning up the Moss Haigh track when a loud "Hallo!" sounded behind him. He turned and saw Squire Daneholme, mounted on a grey that was bulky as the Squire himself.

"Thought it was you," cried the Squire cheerily, as he came up. "Never seen you since the night you dined with me, but I remember such a figure as yours—especially on horseback. You're Roger Lomax's son, of Marshcotes—well, your father wouldn't be ashamed of the pup. I called on you the other night, Lomax, but you were out."

"So I heard," said Griff, conscious of a rising colour.

"Ay, you sly rogue, I'll wager you did. I came to seek a poacher, and I found two lasses—one was trim enough, but small, and she wouldn't turn her face to me—but the other—gad, I wished I'd been a few years younger. Tall and straight, with eyes like dusky moons; never saw her like. Well, well, it's live and let live, and I saw you had good reason for living in the wilderness. But why two, lad, why two of them in one small hut?"

Griff's face went hard, which only made Squire Daneholme laugh the more. "You are wrong, sir—stupidly wrong, I tell you—"

"Oh, to be sure, to be sure. Well, see you, Lomax, I promised that night to ride over soon and see you; I'll come with you to-day, though I was on my way to seek out old Earnshaw at the Herders; he has a brown spaniel for sale, they tell me—a beauty—but that must wait until another day."

Griff had met his match in obstinacy and in dogged faithfulness even to a whim; he knew that this random squire would ride with him, say what he would—and ride the closer if he made demur. What ailed the world that it could not let a man keep one foundling of

the moor and give his strength to hide her from a world which frightened and maltreated her?

"Your welcome is not over hearty," said Squire Daneholme, as they turned into the bridle-track. "Do you fear an old man's rivalry—eh, you young dog?"

"I fear nothing on God's earth except the tattle of the market-place," Griff broke in stormily. "What is it to you if I choose to shelter friends? I tell you, Squire, I do not need you at Lostwithens."

The Squire only chuckled. "A pup of the old breed," he said, "just a pup of the old breed. Your father prided himself, I remember, on the hold he had upon his temper—but, gad, it was worse than mine when it was roused. I'm coming with you because I've set my mind on it," he added, in high good-humour. "If you choose to take a jest amiss, you'll make me think there's truth in the gossip of the countryside, which somehow I don't believe just now. Come, lad, I have heard more about you lately than you know—I've heard, too, of the hard life you're living, and have said you were a fool, a plucky fool, for living it, whatever your reason is—and I thought you would like to see an old friend of your father's, even if he did twit you with the pretty company you keep yonder at Lostwithens. To be sure, my jests are rough; but then we all know I've been a bit of a devil in my time."

Griff laughed, despite himself. Grown old in caprice—for his associates had feared at all times to rouse the temper which was resistless as thunder-fury—the Squire had made his whims his gods, as surely, though in a different fashion, as Ned o' Bracken Clough had done. To-night he would not—and his companion knew it—abandon this visit to Lostwithens if his life were in jeopardy at the journey's end.

"You're a bit of a devil now, sir, to speak frankly," said the younger man. "Still, *we* will give you as good a welcome as we can."

"*We*, forsooth!" roared the Squire, in high glee. "It

runs glibly off your tongue, Lomax. I said you were a pup of the old breed."

Griff answered nothing; they were nearing Lostwithens now, and he could see no way of safety for the woman to whom, as his guest, he had given pledges that she should be free from insult. If the Squire came face to face with Nell Nethercliff, his niece, there would be a storm such as even Ling Crag Moor had not witnessed of late years; yet how to avoid the meeting?

Simple as his life had been of late, Griff found that duplicity returned to him with the need for social intercourse. A mile this side of Lostwithens he turned to the Squire.

"I will go on and light the candles. It is an ill welcome when the house is dark," he said, taking advantage of the oldest of the moor traditions, which bade a host show lighted windows to the coming guest.

He galloped hard to the hut door, dismounted, ran within. The room was in darkness, though he had looked to find Nell sitting with the peat-glow on her face. Hastily he found the candle and lit it. The hut was empty.

"Lassie, lassie!" he cried. "There's danger!"

No answer came. Not even Trash was there to bark defiance, to fawn upon him when he recognised his master. In vain Griff opened the door of the peat-shed and peered within. Nell Nethercliff had gone, and—strangest of all—the dog had vanished too.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT CHANCED AT LOSTWITHENS

MRS. NETHERCLIFF, when Griff had ridden off to Windy Farm, had moved about Lostwithens with a tranquil gladness at her heart. Last night's forebodings were gone; she could laugh now at the keen dread of disaster which had dimmed the moon's splendour and given the roving night-wind a sinister and wailing note.

"I was over tired last night," she said, halting on the edge of the high land above the intake and looking out across the moor.

Indeed, it seemed impossible to harbour aught to-day save a great content and hopefulness. A morning prodigal of joy it was—joy of the larks who could not any way be quiet; joy of the sap which, rising fast in every stalk of ling, in every curling frond of bracken, was showing itself in golden leafage, in green leafage, in every tint of brown and crimson'; joy of the happy-go-lucky humble bee, as he blundered like a wine-full reveller from point to point of his erratic course. Lambs were frisking in the pasture-field below, the field which had been barren before Griff came. Far off, when the little things of nature's teeming nursery had claimed their due attention, there were the upright hills to lead the mind into a grave, yet tranquil, wonderment that the Mother, so careful with her tiniest offspring, should yet have so large and so assured a handling of immensity.

It was this constant change of outlook which to Nell's

eyes lent the moor its special charm. Perhaps she gave to it a personal colouring, seeing how the heath and the master of Lostwithens were one, not only in their aloofness that was almost harsh, but in kindly readiness to foster the weaklings struggling into strength. Womanlike, she needed a man's soul, a man's strength of brain and outlook, to interpret nature for her, and by Griff's toil, by his way with ailing beasts, by the long talks they had at evening-tide of the hidden wonders of the heath, she was learning the moor's own character.

This morning her thoughts were all with Griff, and she did not care to check them. So many things, well worth the knowing, he had taught her, making this heath, which had once seemed dead and profitless, a land filled full of busy homes. The clump of ling behind her—look closely at it, and she knew, for she had been shown it not three days ago, that a colony of long-haired caterpillars was lying in the egg, all ready to be hatched—plump fellows they would be one day, with coats the colour of weather-ripened velveteen, who would weave their own shrouds and die, as the preachers said human folk must do, in order to leap out to life again, winged, wonderful, free of the wide, upper spaces. Moor-spiders, too, with the black spots showing clear upon the cream-white of their bodies, would be slinging their gossamer hammocks from one tough stem of heather to the next. On the flat patch of moor just yonder the shrill-voiced plovers had their nesting-ground, and mottled eggs were watched by jealous mothers.

The woman sighed as she thought of these things to-day—sighed from fulness of content. Faith was the keynote of the morning, and nature seemed to croon above the land, in happy certainty that death was being shamed, outwitted, in every corner of her workshop. Neither was Faith's handmaid, Doubt, so far to seek. A hawk lay waiting for its prey high up above the hump of Laddock Royle; a poaching cat—yellow-coated, shifty-eyed—crept not ten yards away from where the woman stood, and

nosed the ground, dog-like, in search of something he could kill. And it was these notes of harshness, perhaps—nay, of wrong-doing, as it seemed—which gave to the heath its deepest meaning. Faith, and eagerness to work, and love of nestlings—these were the moor's virtues, and yet she marred them, just as poor human folk will do, by craft and cruelty. Surely the Mother was vastly like her children, and surely, too, she must repent, just as her children did, the moments of her wrong-doing.

Ay, she was sorry, and sometimes her grief rose to frenzy. It was then—so Nell Nethercliff assured herself, letting her fancy take her whither it listed—it was then that the wind arose and wept, then that the thunder roared in travail and the bitter tears ran down in rain.

"See where the sun is, Trash!" laughed Nell, rousing herself at last. "We'll not play any more with fancies, you and I, but go and see what Hester is doing in the dairy."

Trash, his air more grave than usual, as it always was when he was left in charge—Trash rose and went beside her down the slope, pressing close to her and glancing now and then about him, as if to spy an enemy and hurl defiance at him. He did not know, poor, eager beast, that an enemy was to come before the sun went down from whom no power of his could rescue Mrs. Nethercliff.

From the dairy, as they neared it, sounded the low, peaceful humming of the churn, and Nell halted on the threshold, as Griff had done, to watch the girl. She was singing as she worked—not happily, but with a certain melancholy that seemed out of keeping with the sunny dairy and the blither music of the churn. Yet the voice, full and deep, was one to make a listener silent; it was only a careless song of the uplands she was singing, but death and life, passion and the wild after-fret of misery, seemed instinct in words which surely carried a softer meaning.

"Oh, there's a lane called Ladslove Lane,
That loiters through the ling;
And there's a lass called William's lass
Who lives at Windhope Ing.

Oh, Will o' Windhope stands as fine
As a wide-girthed tree of oak;
But Nell, his lass, is trim and small
As the light-foot fairy folk.

Oh, there's a lane called Ladslove Lane,
A heartsome spot, and sweet
As lads' desire and lasses' lips
Can be when lovers meet."

She was going forward with the song, when her mood changed on the sudden. She laughed bitterly, and drifted into a ruder ballad which seemed to fit her humour.

"If I'm fain of a lad that will not have me,
I'll find me another as likely as he.
There's trout in the beck as long to a span
As any that left it to fry in the pan.

So flout me, my lad, and I'll flout thee again,
For it's ill when one's heart is left out in the rain.
There's trout in the beck as long to a span
As any that left it to fry in the pan."

Mrs. Nethercliff crossed to the window, and the girl's song stopped abruptly. "You are out of heart, Hester," said the older woman, remembering last night's scene upon the moor.

"Well, we're all of us that at times," the other answered. "It's churn and milk, dust and bake and cook, from summer's end to spring, and from spring to winter-tide. It gets wearisome."

"Not when you do it for—another."

Hester looked straight into her companion's eyes; and Nell Nethercliff saw her own secret reflected there—the secret that she had hidden under soft coverings of fantasy, the secret she had not dared to glance at until now. Yet how clear it all was! A tender speech on her part, and on Hester's a comprehension shown more plainly than by

words—that was all; but Mrs. Nethercliff knew, beyond hope of denial or of doubt, that she loved the big, strong man who had made for her a refuge and a home amid the bleak wilderness of her days.

"That is just it," said Hester steadily—"*when you do it for another*. But there's only one 'other' in all a body's life, and like as not he looks straight past you. It's different with you," she went on, still looking at the other and noting each slim line of beauty, each sign of breeding—everything, indeed, which marked the contrast between herself and Mrs. Nethercliff.

"And why is it different with me?" asked Nell, her eyes following, though without seeing them, the row of leaden cream-vessels, the whitewashed walls, the circling handle of the churn.

"Look at your face, and your hands, and your feet. Hearken to your voice. Think of all the snod little ways they taught you as a lass. I was never taught in that way—my mother died over young for that—and I'm a fool to let my thoughts go wandering out of my station."

With the certainty of her love—ay, even though she knew that Griff "looked past her" as surely as he looked past this upland girl—a great tenderness came to Nell Nethercliff. The girl was not just a farmer's lass whose life lay apart from hers—she was a sister, loving none too wisely, and needing sympathy.

"You'll find your mate, Hester," she said impulsively. "Why, you are not twenty yet, and some day you will laugh at all these fancies—some day, when you have a husband, and little ones, and a house to keep in trim."

Hester did not halt in her churning, and her words came with a slow insistence that was like the churn's voice itself.

"I'll find a mate, may be," she said, "but never the man you called 'another.' If I found him, I'd milk and I'd bake, I'd scrub and brush and dust, and think I was holidaying. 'Twould be for him, you see, and easy. But I am not one to change—it's a gift I lack sorely—and I'll

not find him in this world, I'm thinking. As for t'other world—there's little hope of wedlock there, if all the parsons say be true."

"You're weary, Hester," said the other, not knowing how to comfort the girl in her quiet assurance of unhappiness. "Come in and have some food; it is past the time for dinner already."

"Can you churn, think you, for a while? It doesn't do to leave it for a minute once you've started. Mr. Lomax takes my place when he's here at the dinner-hour."

"Yes, yes. Run in and find something for yourself. You look faint and white, child."

"Maybe I'm getting past my food," said Hester, resigning the churn to Mrs. Nethercliff and watching to see if she had profited by the lessons in butter-making which, half in jest, she had asked for now and then during the past month.

Yet it was not lack of food, not overwork, that was troubling the girl, and when she reached the hut she scarcely tasted the oatcake and cheese. Instead, she looked about her in search of each little token of Griff's presence—the coat hanging on the door, the heavy boots, discarded when yesterday's work was done, the cracked old pipe that lay beside the hearth. All the force of her passionate, wind-mothered heart went out to Griff. Trouble was coming to her, but she did not think of it; with a movement of the splendid arms, still bared above the elbow, she threw off the memory of her folly, and thought only of the love which never could have come her way.

"He'll wed the little lady," she murmured. "She's just marrow to him, as anyone can see by looking at them. Her ways are what his ways were before he came to Lostwithens, and he'll go back again as soon as she has got him into leading-strings. Well, it's not for me to wish them ill, though it'll be like death when there's no master at Lostwithens."

Mrs. Nethercliff, meanwhile, was labouring at the churn. Her strength had not returned to her as yet, and she was glad when Hester came to relieve her.

"'Twill soon be done now," said the girl; "then I must hurry back, for Mr. Lomax will be wanting to be —where his heart is," she added, nodding towards the intaken land.

Her own pain was so great that she could not forbear this little gibe; and she was fiercely glad to see the other wince. But the day had set its seal of peace upon Mrs. Nethercliff, and she was tranquil still when she crossed to the hut in search of her own meal. As the way of women is when their men-folk are abroad, she did not sit long at meat, nor did she find much appetite; and as soon as she had finished she went out among the ling again and lay there through the long afternoon, the dog dreaming his own dreams beside her.

Lower and lower moved the sun, and softer and softer grew the under-notes of winged things and the wind; and still she lay there, content to watch the hills and think her thoughts. The look of Griff as he rode beside her long ago at hunting-time, the look of Griff when he had ministered to her and saved her from the snow-sickness, the look of Griff when he bent to pick and spade, pursuing his unequal combat with the moor —these came and went before her, these were the pictures on the wide moor-canvas which so contented her. She was stirred by little wayward thrills, which would not be resisted; stronger gusts—of tenderness, of hope, of eager looking forward to she knew not what—swept through her; then again she seemed to stand away from herself, and to wonder, and to see the keen, strong light of love upon the face of the woman who yesterday had been Nell Nethercliff.

Not once did she think of denying her love. It had grown too strong for that. In all the lands of all the world there was but one man—a man strong, rough, gentle, and complete—and he was her master now.

Hester had done her churning, had sought out Nell Nethercliff, and, not finding her, had already climbed a half-mile of the track to Windy Farm. Twice the girl turned round for a glance at Lostwithens, and each time went on again with an impatient sigh.

"He's not for me," she repeated; "never in this world for me."

The westward sky grew dyed with crimson, and still Mrs. Nethercliff lay there, the pleasant scent of ling about her and the lowing of Griff's cattle in her ears. And then the blow fell suddenly, as if a thunderbolt had struck her from the blue, quiet hollow of the sky. There was no one in sight; the heath, to all appearance, was as it had been a moment since; but she was in the grip of that same foreboding which had conquered her last night. With instincts tuned to delicacy by the lone life of the moor, she could not doubt the message that had come to her; for now she shared in a measure that hillmen's sense which, if it leads them sometimes down strange paths of superstition, can also give them, at the crises of their lives, a trustworthy and unfailing power of second sight.

"Griff, Griff!" she cried involuntarily, and hid her face between her hands.

Trash, alert to recognise her trouble, crept nearer and began to whine.

"Trouble is coming, Trash—trouble too big for us," the woman murmured, fondling him with the desperate tenderness of one who finds a friend in need.

She looked out by and by across the moor, and saw a black speck moving slowly upward. Far down toward Ling Crag the speck was; and now again it was nearer, bigger; and again it was so close that she knew it for a man's figure. She thought of Ahab, of Elijah, of the cloud no bigger than a man's hand; she watched the moving figure, spellbound, waiting for she knew not what.

Gabriel Hirst—for he was the intruder—as soon as he

drew near enough to see the woman sitting on the slope above Lostwithens, told himself that Providence had surely led him here in a good hour. It was Mrs. Nethercliff he wished to see, not Griff, and she was alone. Eagerly he made forward until at last he stood before her, square of body, sombre of face, the light of a stern religion in his eyes. Trash sniffed at him disdainfully and growled a little; for Gabriel had too little of the wind-free man about him to please the heath-trained dog.

The man and the woman were silent for a space. Mrs. Nethercliff had risen and was looking quietly at him, wondering what he meant to say.

"Griff is not here?" said the preacher at last.

"No. He has gone to Windy Farm."

"That is well. I am his friend, and I came to have speech with you alone."

"Tell me—oh, tell me quickly!—what is it that you have to say?"

"That you are playing with two souls—his own and yours."

Sick-hearted as she was, and certain that disaster waited for her, the woman's pride asserted itself.

"I did not know it," she said coldly; "and, in any case, my soul is not in your keeping."

"Ay, but it is. Word came to me last night, after I had prayed and wrestled for the Light, and I was bidden to seek you out, and save both you and Griff."

She glanced at him with a sort of weary curiosity. This sober-garbed, square man, who looked something between a yeoman-farmer and a Calvinist minister, must be the Gabriel Hirst of whom Griff had spoken more than once. Yet her pride died down when she looked from the commonplace, grim face to the eyes, full, dark, and lit with the misty, far-off brightness which told of vigils and of visions; she must let him have his say, taking no offence, because whatever else he might be, he was at least transparently sincere.

"You came once before, while the great snow was here?" she said, shivering as she told herself that she was nearing just such another crisis of her life. "You came to speak to Mr. Lomax then, and I think, though he did not tell me, that you said I was a danger to him."

"I did," answered Gabriel bluntly. "He would not hearken, and I have sorrowed for him; and then last night it came to me that I must seek *you* out and warn you."

Was it at the moment when Gabriel Hirst came to his resolve, she wondered, that she had felt last night a sudden dread, a sense of trouble near at hand? It might well be.

"Go on," she said, her voice dry and husky.

Yet even Gabriel paused for a moment. He did not like his mission; the natural man in him was abashed, moreover, to find this woman so quiet, so dainty, so full of a certain nameless quality of goodness—the quality which mothers and happy wives show to their men-folk. The preacher crushed his feeling, however; he was here to warn, and the warning had no tenderness in it.

"This man lived in peace here before you came," he said abruptly. "He left the world because of some great sin he had committed, as you know."

"I had guessed as much. It did not matter," she added, with a touch of defiance. "What did I care for his sins? He was kind to me; he saved my life; he spends long nights of discomfort on a bed of straw, so that I may have the privacy of his hut. If better men were as considerate as he—why, *you* would not be here to-day."

The preacher, now that his purpose was strengthened by resistance, gathered his powers together, and spoke convincingly, as he was wont to do in lonely upland pulpits. There was a massiveness, a certainty about him, though his voice was quiet and even, not wild at all as when he painted fires of hell for rude farmers, quarrymen, and land-labourers. For there was gentle blood

in Gabriel Hirst, and instinct warned him that more subtlety was needed if this woman were to be persuaded.

"Listen," he went on. "Griff Lomax sinned with a great sinning. What the sin was I am not free to tell you, save that, by his own confession, it was great. There's no man but myself about the moorside who knows his secret; but it abides with him, and he has laboured, year after year, to earn his absolution. Sometimes I have sought to bring him back into the world, thinking he would find greater means there of winning peace by going among his fellows, by doing good to them; but oftener, remembering what strength I gain by night-long vigils on the moor, it seemed that he was right. In loneliness he must work, in loneliness he must pray, until light comes to him."

"If doing good to his fellows is his way of peace, you may be content," said the other, with a little air of possession, as though, just because she loved him, Griff was already hers. "He has done kindnesses that few know of—the maimed and the hunted and the starving are always free of shelter here. Only last week a man called—I was in the hut alone—and he had come, it seemed, to thank Mr. Lomax for what he had done for him a year before—to thank him for buying a mortgage on his farm, and lending him money with which to go on again, when otherwise he and his wife and children would have starved. Mr. Lomax was angry when he found I knew it; he is constantly giving help, and always tries to hide his good deeds; he—"

The preacher's voice, deep, calm, utterly assured, broke in upon her impulsive praise of Griff.

"Yet he has not found the light as yet. He may give refuge to men's carnal bodies, he may aid them in their carnal adversities—but of the world beyond he has learned nothing. He cannot give spiritual comfort, for he has found none himself."

"Has he not?" For the first time there was irony in the woman's voice, though she was sad, weighed down

by foreboding and the knowledge that she must yield, soon or late, to this stranger's will. "Has he not? Who are you—you, who have not lived near his thoughts, as I have—to say he has not found spiritual comfort? Have you seen him when he stood and watched the big hills darkening into sleep? Have you seen the light on his face when he laboured at the land-winning down yonder? Have you heard him talk to the beasts when they are sick, or to men and women when they are weary? You have not, or you would know that the moor is wide enough to hold two Gods—your own and his."

Again the preacher was abashed for the moment. A doubt had flashed across the sombre groundwork of his faith. What if Griff had a God—what if his God were bigger, kindlier, wider in His outlook upon human sin and human striving for the right? For a moment only Gabriel Hirst stood irresolute; then, dismissing the thought as a temptation set across his path, he spoke again. Quietly, inexorably, with a subtle twisting of all arguments to fit his own view of the matter, he made it plain that Griff's ultimate happiness rested upon his return to the old life of loneliness. He had found peace by means of that life; he was on his way to secure still greater peace when he found the woman in the snow; since then he had grown more restless, more prone to false gaiety and to holidays from the task which he had set himself; his best friend could ask only to see him free once more to live the life appointed.

None but a sincerely godly, sincerely narrow man could so have drawn a screen across the mirror in which Nell Nethercliff and Griff were learning to see truth reflected. None but a woman weary of body, oppressed by foreknowledge of disaster, would have yielded to his importunity, thinking that her duty was made plain at last. Mrs. Nethercliff, shivering as with bodily cold, looked out across the hills—the hills which she and another had watched, and loved, and appealed to for

their spiritual food. This preacher was right, she told herself; surely she had known this long while past that her curse was Hagar's curse, though made more bitter now by the loss of all she had—her child; and, after all, she must soon have left Lostwithens, as she had meant to do as soon as she was strong—always as soon as she was strong.

At last she turned her eyes upon Gabriel Hirst, and he wondered at the fire in them.

"I will go," she said.

"God has moved your heart. It is well," the other answered, without triumph, but rather as if he had known throughout that the battle would be won. "You will go to-day—at once?"

"Do you think I should *dare* to stay until to-morrow?" she cried, with sudden anger. "Yes, I will go at once—though the sun is going down, and the moor is wide between here and Halifax, where I must find my —my friends."

Her voice broke at the word "friends." Truly she had but one friend in the world, and she must leave him to seek aid of those who had only kinship with her.

"I have thought of your welfare," went on the preacher, with his maddening calm. "You shall return with me, and my wife will give you shelter for the night."

She turned on him. He had been able to persuade her in one thing, because he had made it seem that Griff's happiness cried aloud for such a sacrifice; but his power had reached its limit.

"Go back *with you*?" she cried. "Claim shelter from the man who has done this to me? Listen to me: you are sincere, I know it, but from this day I shall loathe the thought of you. You have robbed me, and you give nothing back; and in the time to come, you will wake at nights, I think, sometimes, and shiver, and remember that you sent a woman out into the friendless moor."

Nell Nethercliff, in her mingled strength and weak-

ness, perplexed the preacher. Mere human passions, hopes, desires, were nothing to him while the spiritual fire still burned in him; he could not understand the woman's bitterness, when she had of her own free will promised to go. He would have insisted on her seeking shelter at Ling Crag, would have improved the moment by ghostly counsel, but she cut short his words.

"Go!" she said, pointing down the moor. "And may God forgive you if you have advised me wrongly."

He went, in silence and in shame. There was no exaltation in his mood; he was a man again, and sorry for the work which he had found to do this day.

Mrs. Nethercliff stood watching him till he was out of sight, then looked at Trash, a questioning, dumb misery in her glance. He did his best to comfort her, but there was little he could say, save wag his tail and lick her hands and lift his hairy, wistful face to hers.

"I will go—at once," she said, like one talking in her sleep. "I must not go near the hut—not even for a farewell—for I might forget my promise. Besides, *he* might return, and then—yet it is for his happiness—the black crow came and told me so, and I ought not to mind—and, after all, he did not love me—that is a great deal to be thankful for. It would have been harder then to go."

Weakness, the sudden strain following long days of happiness and security, the desperate courage needed to give that simple promise, "I will go"—all fought against her at one time, in front, to right and left, from behind with coward's blows. She felt that, save by some great effort, she could not keep her reason long. She made the effort, and stood up, cold as ice indeed and hopeless, but brave to endure the uttermost.

Only one farewell she made, and that was spoken at the little grave on the moor-top. Just beyond the grave there was a dingle filled with stunted oaks and alders, at whose roots the primroses were all a-bloom. Griff had shown her them not many days ago.

She gathered a handful of the flowers and laid them on the grave.

"Good-bye, little lad," she said. "I wish I had you with me, though you'd be heavy to carry, laddie, would you not, as far as Halifax?"

More than once she had asked Griff if there were any way across the moor to Halifax. This was in the days when she thought of leaving him to-morrow — that happy, vague to-morrow—and he had pointed out the track which would take her into the nearest highroad.

It was this track she followed now. A frail, small figure, crushed, so it seemed, by the silent hills about her, she went bravely forward until she reached the last corner of the path from which Lostwithens could be seen. She halted here, and turned, and looked back upon the place where her child and her happiness lay buried, then hurried on again. And it was very piteous.

Trash kept close beside her, mindful of his trust, but she scarcely knew that he was with her. She was looking, with vague wonder, at the heath and sky. The sun was getting into his gauzy night-gear, woven of saffron, gold, and crimson, as he had done last night; the moon lay round and white toward the east, as she had been yester even, though she had risen later and had scarcely left the Ludworth hills as yet; the moor-birds made their plaint, and a late bee blundered home. All was as it had been last night; all—save that now she was alone.

The track wound, deep and broad, between tall banks of peat whose bearded summits rustled in the wind. There could be no difficulty as to her road, for Griff had told her that when she reached this broader path—made long ago for those who cut peats for fuel—it would lead her straight into the highroad. Yet the knowledge brought no comfort with it. She would as willingly be lost upon the moor, she thought, as trust the doubtful mercies of her kinsfolk there at Halifax.

Once, twice, she stumbled as she walked, but each

time she recovered herself with a brave effort. It was after the second stumble that she looked down and saw that Trash was with her still.

"Go back, lad," she murmured. "You're his, you know, and perhaps—perhaps he'll feel lonely now."

But Trash did not care to understand. He moved on beside her still, and she forgot him soon; the mere effort to keep her limbs in motion claimed all her attention.

"I love him—he'll not be the worse for knowing that —Griff, I love you!"

The cry came suddenly. She did not know it had been uttered. The moon, the heath, the steady planets and the stars which blinked and trembled in the blue, were circling round her giddily. And Trash, when he saw her fall, lifted his voice and howled across the waste.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW GRIFF FORGOT THE YEARS

GRIFF, when he returned to find the hut empty, stood motionless for a while. The air felt chill, though the night was balmy as if high summer had come in; there was a sense of loss, of desolation, which he could not thrust aside.

He was roused by the sound of the Squire's horse at the door, and mechanically he lit a second candle, went to the oak chest which served him as a cupboard, and got out spirits and a couple of tumblers.

"What, alone?" cried the Squire, with a cheery laugh, after he had hitched his grey to the doorpost. "Good for you, Lomax — though, if your women-folk are hiding in the peat-shed, 'twill be narrow room and cold company, I'm thinking. Or have they slipped out by the other door, as Ned o' Bracken Clough did?"

"I am alone, Squire," Griff answered curtly.

At the least, Mrs. Nèthercliff had been saved from insult, and he must hide his own worry until his guest had left him.

"Well, well, I told you it was live and let live, though you might have presented me, Lomax—especially to the trim lass who stood higher than my shoulder and fooled me with her big black eyes."

"She is Joshua Royd's daughter, and comes to make my butter for me."

"Ah!" chuckled the old man. "Do you churn at

night, lad? And the other—had she come to get your breakfast ready for you betimes? There, your father's temper will be loosed on me if I say more—I see it coming—but you must let me say this, Lomax. 'Tis a small hut for two of them—deuced small—eh? Only a brave man would risk as much—eh? Will I have a drop of liquor? To be sure I will. I've a long ride home, and the Lord only knows why I followed a whim so far across country."

The Squire did not stay long; and when he had gone, with a sly hint that he would ride over soon again, Griff went to the laithe, the mistals, the stable, in the hope that Hester might have stayed later than she had meant to do, and that Mrs. Nethercliff might, for sake of company, have gone with her. The laithe was empty of what he sought; so were the mistals; so was the stable, at the door of which he found his horse, forgotten until now, patiently waiting to be let in.

He stabled the horse, then went up the moor to the place where he had buried the victim of the snow. More than once he had found Nell Nethercliff here, when he had left her lonely for too long and the old sadness had returned to her. Perhaps he would find her here to-night.

A handful of primroses lay upon the grave, the moonlight shining velvety upon their petals; these told him she had been lately here, for they were freshly gathered. For the rest, the moor was silent.

Eagerly as the preacher had prayed that light should come to Griff, steadfastly as he had worked to-day to help his friend in his own despite, he was powerless to achieve what this moment at the graveside was doing for the master of Lostwithens. The light broke in on him at last. It was God's moment, and the man's soul lay crystal-clear before him. The utter loneliness, with Nell Nethercliff no longer here; the needlessness of heath and sky and steady moon, if she had gone from him; the wild, quick longing to hold her in his arms, and keep

her there; these things, and the reason of them, were clear to him.

It was the hour when Mrs. Nethercliff had found the peat-road. It was the hour when, out of the flesh which hampered it, the soul of each leaped forward, freed for one moment to go and find its mate. With a cry wild as Nell's, but one deeper and more full of strength, the man's voice went out across the waste.

"Come back to me. Come back, for I love you and I need you, Nell!"

There was no surprise to Griff in this. He did not even ask himself why she had gone; his one care was to draw her back to him—back to Lostwithens, to the hut where he and she had sat through long winter nights and shorter nights of spring.

He stood, listening eagerly; and from across the waste there came, it seemed, the echo of his cry—and then, after a long, long silence, the long-drawn howling of a dog. Gradually the first full liberty of spirit meeting spirit, unhampered by the clay, was checked. He saw less clearly, and fear began to come upon him. She was out yonder somewhere—yonder, where the moonbeams strove to light the sullen darkness of the peat—but the land stretched wide on every hand, and she might die amid its solitude if he could not find her before the dawn.

Not knowing which way to turn, yet impatient of inaction, he plunged into the heather, hoping, so far as he had any consciousness of what he did, that instinct would guide him to the woman whom he sought.

Trash, meanwhile, had taken the charge of matters into his own keeping. When first the woman swayed, then fell and lay where she had fallen, the dog had been in sore perplexity. He knew that he had been left to guard Nell Nethercliff; yet he knew, too, that she was ill—not dead, for his dog's scent told him that—and that they had come far away from succour. He did not make up his mind at once, but ran restlessly to and fro along the peat-road. Sometimes he howled, as if

claiming pity from the moor; again he whined; and all the while he pattered up and down upon the silent peat, and knew not what to do.

At last, when still the woman did not move, he came and licked her face, as if to tell her that he would not be long away, then started for Lostwithens at a steady trot. The hut door was open, but Griff was not within; so the good beast went out again into the yard, and put his nose to the ground, and found two trails—one leading westward, marking the few yards Griff had gone at the Squire's stirrup when bidding him farewell, the other pointing eastward to the child's grave.

Trash stood irresolute between the trails, and it was then that Griff's cry rang out a second time across the moor, as again, in hopelessness of finding her amid the waste, he gave that wild appeal, "I love you and I need you, Nell!" The dog pricked up his hairy ears and darted forward; he had found what he came out to seek. Another moment—the moment spent by Griff in fear for the safety of Nell Nethercliff—and he was by his master's side.

"Where is she?" Griff asked, turning in his aimless stride and appealing to the dog as to a comrade of greater intelligence than his own.

Trash lifted two luminous eyes to his, big with pity and impatience; and the man, who had lived long with Trash and understood him, nodded quietly.

"Lead on, lad," was all he said.

It was so that they came to the peat-road—Trash running on before, Griff hurrying after him. It was so that they found a slender figure, dark on the darker peat, save for the whiteness of her face, sorrowful and still beneath the moonlight, save for the white hands lying helpless on the mould.

"My lass, my lass!" cried Griff.

He lifted her. He put his lips to hers—it was his right now, he felt—and held her close and warm. Once before he had carried her across the heath, but

not as now he carried her. There seemed a lifetime between then and now.

Her eyes opened suddenly. She saw the strong, kind face that bent so close above her, and thought that she was dreaming.

"Go away," she whispered. "I tell you, go away. I have left you at Lostwithens—it was for your happiness—I have left you, and I must be strong. Please—ah, go away—you torture me. I shall find no strength to leave you now."

"You'll find strength to stay, lassie, after I have carried you to Lostwithens."

She started, tried to hold herself at arm's length, that she might look more closely in his face. This was no dream, then? It was Griff—Griff himself, strong to succour and befriend her. What had happened? She remembered setting out for Halifax; she remembered finding the peat-road; surely she had not yielded to weakness when she had been so sure of her own courage—courage, not for herself, but for Griff's welfare.

"I had thought I could go on," she murmured. "*He* came, you understand—I can only think of him as the black crow, because he wore his preacher's garb."

"Gabriel Hirst has been to you?" cried Griff, with sudden passion. "Was it he who sent you to what might have been your death?"

"Oh, hush! He did not know—he thought, I mean, that I was a hindrance to you—and he was right, perhaps."

Griff was silent for a moment. Many mercies had been shown him to-night; how could he harbour anger against another? Yet his heart was bitter toward Gabriel, and he had to fight down the bitterness.

"Well, you're safe, as God wills it," he said at last; "and it is not for me to judge. Only, lassie, if you had died here, there'd have been bloodshed between Gabriel and myself."

She did not answer. She did not need to answer,

for it was enough to know that all was well with them. She nestled to him with a child's content; it no longer seemed that she was seeking his happiness by going from Lostwithens; rather, she realised that now she could not leave him even if she would.

Across the miles of moor they went, as once before they had gone, these three; and then, as now, it was Trash who had saved the woman, Trash who ran to and fro, aware of his good deed and barking joyously.

Mrs. Nethercliff was drowsily conscious that the man who carried her so lightly was talking to her in eager tones, but she could not fix a meaning to his words; she knew only that it was pleasant to lie back and take no thought for the morrow.

The great moon shone on them. The wind piped sweet as a throstle's song. And the man knew that he had found his mate, knew that the years of disaster, toil, self-loathing, were all worth while, now that their reward had come. He too looked not to the morrow, nor back into the years; to-night they were one, and her hair blew cool and soft about his face, and he thought that he smelled again the scent of violets in the Manor garden when the dew fell on them at time of gloaming.

They reached the hut, the three staunch comrades, the three who had snatched love and tender days from the grim maw of the heath. As on that snowbound night, Griff laid the woman on the bed and drew the blankets round her; and just before she fell asleep her hand closed tight on his.

"Ah, don't leave me! They come to take my happiness away—when you're not there," she murmured.

He reached out for the chair and pulled it towards him with his one free hand; and, when the morning came, and Nell Nethercliff awoke to wonder if she were out on the bleak moor, she found that he was sitting there, her hand still locked in his. He had not slept, and he had scarcely known that he was cramped and

stiff; for all night long he had thought of this new, strange thing which had come to change his life.

After the sleep had cleared away from her, the colour crept into her cheeks and he felt her hand withdrawn from his. And so he got up, and opened the door, and went out and stood with his face to the eager wind and his eyes upon the hills.

"God knows I am alive," he said, with a laugh of sheer content.

CHAPTER XX

AT BRACKEN CLOUGH

HESTER ROYD, when she came to Lostwithens a week after Mrs. Nethercliff's flight and quick return, did not go at once to the dairy, as she had done on the last butter-making day. She knocked, as usual, at the hut door, and waited a moment before entering; but no cheery call to enter answered her, for Griff and Mrs. Nethercliff, though their voices told that they were within, seemed too absorbed to heed the knock. Quickened by jealousy and her own forlornness, Hester's ears were alert to detect the new note in their tones. It was not that they talked eagerly or with exuberant gaiety; but there was a certain happiness, a great surety of fellowship and of well-being, which of old had been absent from their intercourse.

Again the girl knocked, impatiently this time, and walked in without more ceremony. She glanced from Mrs. Nethercliff, seated on one side the table, to Griff, who faced her at the board; and she knew at once that the thing which she had prophesied, the thing which she had dreaded, had come to pass between these two. They loved each other, and they knew it.

Hester could not take her eyes from Griff's face. The eyes were the same; the mouth, half stern, half wilful, the chin, which of late years had grown too square for its fellow-members, were as they had been; yet the face was altered, as the face of a moorland slope is changed when east wind shifts to west and spring comes

in. The change was clearly to be read; yet none—save Mrs. Nethercliff herself—could have shared Hester's keen discernment. This was the look for which she hungered; yes, she had prayed, in her own pagan, haphazard fashion, that she might bring the manhood back to him and restore the joy of living to this man, who, a little while ago, had been a something bigger, and yet less, than man.

Griff's cheery welcome this morning jarred upon the girl. What did she want with his kindness, if he could never have more to offer her? And yet, beneath the pain, there was a jealous wonder as to the turn of chance which had brought Griff to an understanding of his love. She was so little, this woman who had conquered, thought Hester, so frail of body and of beauty; surely a tall, strong lass from off the uplands was a likelier mate for one who worked upon the soil.

"But he'll not bide here," she thought, echoing her words of a week ago. "He was born for a smooth life, and she'll lead him back to it."

All this passed through her mind while she was bidding them a grave good-morning. She fancied that her face told nothing, that she was carrying herself as well as might be through a harsh ordeal. Yet Griff noticed the change in her, and attributed it to one cause; Nell Nethercliff saw it, and attributed it to another; and both were wrong.

"You look tired and anxious, Hester," said Mrs. Nethercliff. "Is your father worse?"

Hester clutched at the excuse. "Neither worse nor better, thank you, and it's that which troubles me. If he worsened, he might mend again; but it's when he stays the same, day in, day out, and never seems to care what happens to the land, that I get fearful."

"Will he need help again to-day, think you?" asked Griff.

"Nay, it would only fret him, I'm thinking. He's that way, is father; he must do everything himself.

The last time you went up, Mr. Lomax, a week ago—"

A quick glance passed between the two who sat at table, a glance of understanding and content; but Hester, though she saw it, stopped only for a moment.

"When you went up, he thought it kindly of you, and I know you eased the work for him; but he was fretting sorely when I got up to Windy Farm a half-hour after you left—just fretting because he'd taken you from your land here, and because he seemed to be getting old, he said. Well, I must get to my churn, and so be home again the sooner. There's one thing, though, you could do for father, Mr. Lomax, and I made bold to promise it."

"And gladly. What is it, Hester?"

"Only just to ride to Cranshaw and pay some money that has been owing over long. It isn't that a few days would matter, one way or the other, but he's fidgety-like, is father, and he seems to fancy that the world is going to look sharp after him." She paused and the red deepened in her cheeks. "He isn't fit to ride himself," she went on, "and I thought you'd take the money for him just to ease his mind. And I shall be here, you see, when you get back, and I can take the receipt to him."

"Of course I'll go," said Griff. "Friendship is a poor thing, surely, if it won't carry me as far as Cranshaw."

Hester took out a purse and counted the money into Griff's hand. "It's William Roper he owes it to—you'll remember he has a house by the Upper Brigg, and deals in lime and stone."

Yes, Griff remembered—remembered, too, certain transactions of bygone days between William Roper and himself, transactions which related neither to lime nor stone, but to a fine strain of fighting-cocks which William reared.

"I shall be glad to see the old sinner again," he laughed, "so tell your father the journey won't be wasted."

After Hester had gone to the dairy, Griff glanced at Mrs. Nethercliff tenderly, masterfully, with an air of possession which did not hurt her pride at all. She was stronger now; indeed, she had rallied quickly, for with returning consciousness had come the knowledge of all that the moonlit journey home had meant—the journey during which she had lain in Griff's arms and had gathered, not the words, but the meaning of the words. Since then, though each read knowledge in the other's eyes, there had been no diffidence between them; rather, they thought and felt so utterly in unison that even the comradeship of the older day seemed dwarfed and insufficient. Not a kiss, not a word of love, had passed between them since that night; it was not needful. So long as the air they breathed had in it this new, magic quality, Nell Nethercliff asked nothing more—save to get quickly well again for his sake. All the story of the preacher's coming was known to him by this time, all the courage she had needed to set off; and he had found himself forgiving Gabriel because of the knowledge he had brought unwittingly to two people who found such knowledge sweet.

And so he looked at her this morning before going to saddle the mare, and the gladness of possession was in his glance.

"See you, lassie, I could chain you to a staple," he said, "but I'd rather have your promise not to leave while I'm away."

"I am not likely to," she answered, with drooping lids above soft, laughing eyes.

"You were not likely to when I left you last, or so I thought. What if another hoody crow comes over the moor and croaks a sermon?"

"I—I shall send him to preach to you, I think."

"Is it safe to leave you?" he repeated, willing to jest till gloaming-tide so long as jests brought out such sudden wealth of changes in the woman's face.

"Quite safe—but you can chain me if you will," she said demurely.

She was waiting at the door when he returned, leading his mare by the bridle; and instinctively she reached out her hands to him.

"Come quickly back," she whispered.

Slowly he rode down across his intake; and when he should have noted with accustomed zeal the yellow band of soil which marked the new-won trenches, he turned instead to look at the woman who was watching from the doorway. She waved a hand to him, and the warm blood mounted to his face; truly, as he had cried aloud in gladness seven days ago, he was alive!

His track lay through Hazel Dene, and not until he rode into the little wood, full now of spreading leafage, did he remember what a wizard's touch this place had to bring back the past to life. He looked again upon the wood-ways which his wife had known; he remembered what had lain between them, of tenderness and constancy; and he faced for the first time what all men in such case as his must face. Was it he who not long ago had said, had believed, that his power to love had been buried with his wife? It might be so; but to-day he knew that he had spoken no true word, knew that Nell Nethercliff and he were joined, not by the reckless, unformed love of early manhood and early womanhood, but by that link, binding soul and heart and mind, which is forged later in our lives and is unbreakable. If he were never again to see the woman who was waiting for him at the hut, it would be the same. He had not set his lips to hers, except when she lay in his arms a week ago; it did not matter. As surely as the sun lay golden on the slopes of Hazel Dene, he was wedded to Nell Nethercliff—wedded in the fine, deep sense which

only is assured when heaven makes its marriages among the world-toilers.

Ah, true! But what of the first wife? She had trusted him; she had died in giving him an heir; it seemed a treason and a shame that he should set another in her place.

Griff did not understand the little passions which seized his fellows, stayed with them for awhile, and left them with unfurrowed brows; with him emotion cut deep, or passed him altogether by. His face was lined and strained, as he pulled up the mare and sat looking out on Hazel Dene. Tense feeling — second sight, or fancy bred of loneliness—was cording every muscle, touching each eager nerve. Two women had played their big parts in his life, and the second—the second was, to his certain knowledge, his mate, the one mate possible.

For a while he halted there, still wondering. He sought a sign, and presently a sign came to him.

There was nothing to be seen; but he felt that someone came to his stirrup, he felt a hand glide into his, he heard a soft voice at his ear—Kate's voice, the voice of the dead wife.

"There's no jealousy, dear lad, beyond the grave," it said.

The hand slipped out of his. There was no presence, seen or unseen, at his stirrup. Yet the mood stayed with him for awhile—that mood of clearness, knowledge, which comes from a far world—and he saw the story of all good women's hearts printed, as it were, upon a fair, white page. He saw the meaning of good women's love, the sacrifice of it, the unselfish, passionate yearning for the husband's welfare. This was the tale of the centuries; it was the tale which Kate had come from ghost-land to whisper in his ear.

The "far-sight" of the hill-men was taken from him, quickly as it had come. He passed a hand across his eyes, and looked about him, and the ferny trough of

Hazel Dene was no longer bitter-sad with memories. It was as if one grave in Marshcotes kirkyard were hidden quietly by daffodil and daisy, by pansies with their wistful thoughts.

Past Hazel Mill he rode, answering heedlessly to the miller's cheery greeting; past the fallen pine-log he went, on which not long ago he had encountered Greta; and a great joy was stirring at his heart.

Greta herself, as it chanced, was coming up Water Lane, a basket of eggs on her arm, just as he rode through the gate that opened on the bridle-way. She flushed at sight of him, and seemed minded to go on, with a word for courtesy's sake and no more; then she thought better of it.

"Gabriel did you a great wrong," she said impulsively. "He told me of it when he came home from Lostwithens —that night, a week ago—and I said to him what I have never said before, though I have often thought it. 'If godliness can be so cruel, Gabriel,' I said, 'I wish that I had married a sinner who was kind.' I thought he would have struck me; then he went very pale; and I saw that he too wondered if he had dealt rightly with a woman who was weak, and tired, and glad of the refuge she had found.—Mr. Lomax, you do believe that I am sorry? You do believe that I had no knowledge of what Gabriel meant to do? And ever since I have wondered, but have not known where to ask, how—how you took her loss."

To Greta's wonderment, he laughed.

"I took it very lightly, Greta, for I found her that same night, and she is at Lostwithens now."

Ready sympathy, as jealousy had done in Hester's case, sharpened the eyes of this pretty matron with the girlish colour and the soft brown hair. She saw the look in the other's eyes, interpreted it, and, being glad, found wisdom to conceal her knowledge, lest a chance word of hers should come amiss and so spoil all.

Perhaps with no other woman could Griff have shared

the knowledge he had gained just now in Hazel Dene. With Greta he could share it, for since early days she seemed to have been his friend, eager to counsel wisely.

"You remember Kate?" he said.

She looked at him, amazed. It was not of Kate that she had thought to hear.

"Kate? Your wife, you mean?" she stammered.

"Yes. She came to me just now in the dene yonder, and what said she, think you, Greta? That there was no jealousy beyond the grave."

"Ah, she was right, she was right!" cried the other, thinking he spoke in parables only, not dreaming that he *knew* how surely Kate had come to him. "Did I not tell you as much long, long ago? Did I not urge you to take life into your hands again and live it bravely, gladly—yes, *righteously*."

"You did, and I would not believe you at the time. Now—" He stopped, and his face darkened.

"Yes, now?"

"There's the past, Greta," he said simply. "You know I went out from life with a stain on me. Would any woman care to share the knowledge and the burden with me?"

"She would. I don't know what the burden is; I don't ask; but it will not be too big for her."

"Yet you know nothing of her," he said, smiling faintly.

"I *feel* that I know her, and that all is well. Gabriel would say that he was under inspiration if he felt as I do—but perhaps I am more modest, and claim less, than you queer heath-born folk."

"No burden would be too great?" he repeated, like a lad who repeats a lesson.

"None so long as—oh, won't you understand? So long as you are just life to her."

"I will remember," he said, and was tightening the reins already when she laid a hand on the mare's neck.

"Stay!" she said. "I want you to do something, Mr. Lomax. If happiness is coming to you, I want you to help another who's in need of happiness."

"I will do anything."

"Ah, no!" said Greta, half sadly, half mischievously, with a knowledge surer than her years warranted. "Men are not like that. They may promise to shoulder any burden, but if it proves too heavy, they leave it by the roadside, and tell everyone they meet what good excuse they had. No, I do not want you to promise anything, and what I ask is not so very much. Will you ride up to Bracken Clough to-day?"

Griff moved uneasily in the saddle. He had meant a week ago to ride up to Bracken Clough, and not even the sight of Hester this morning had served to remind him of his resolve; Nell Nethercliff had hidden all but the great, new truth from him.

"It will seem strange to you, I know," Greta went on, "but I cannot tell you just why I wish it. There is a reason, though; and if you go to Ned, and urge him to do *what he knows is right*, he will understand. Gabriel has tried to persuade him, but it is useless; and somehow, though we thought you light once, Mr. Lomax, it is you nowadays who have the gift of healing our sore places."

"They call it Sad Man's Luck," said the other, with a passing touch of his old grimness.

"Whatever they call it, you will use it now? You are friendly, too, with Ned, and you may persuade him. Tell me you will do it!"

"Yes," said Griff, and turned his horse, not to the left, through Ling Crag village, but to the right, facing the stony lane which would lead him straight across the moor to Cranshaw. Yet he did not tell Greta that he knew the nature of his errand, nor did he say what simple arguments he meant to use in bringing the transgressor into right ways of thinking.

Yet, as he reached the top of Water Lane and

struck into the open moor, he could not keep back a laugh.

"Ned will not fail me," he muttered; "it rests between his strength and mine."

He had forgotten the errand which had brought him out to-day, but it happened that the easiest bridle-track to Bracken Clough was gained by crossing that very Upper Brigg at Cranshaw which marked the neighbourhood of Roper's house. Roper himself—a short man and a squat, with a mouth and chin that were for ever chuckling—was standing at the door of the shed which served as office. He had not altered with the years, nor did he seem to think that Griff had done, for he greeted him as of old.

"Why, Mr. Lomax, I'll lay a load of lime to a penny that you have come to buy a fighting-cock or two!" he cried.

"You've lost your wager, William. I have come to settle a bill."

"By the Heart, you must have altered, then! 'Twas not your character once on a day, sir, choose who hears me say it."

"Oh, it's not for myself," laughed the other. "Joshua Royd, over at Windy Farm, is ailing, and he asked me to pay in some money for him."

Roper took the money, counted it, and put it in his pocket, which afterwards he smacked complacently.

"Naught like brass," said he; "it's as good for a pocket, is brass, as victuals is for a man's body. Not that Joshua need have been so hurried-like; he's a man to trust, none better, and he's oftener soon than late with what he owes. Well, I'll settle his bit of a bill, and you can take the note back with you."

The settled bill was brought, and Griff was riding across the bridge and up the lane that would take him to the moor, when Roper called to him.

"So you are going farther, sir?" he said, the inbred curiosity of the moor-folk asserting itself.

"Yes, to Bracken Clough," Griff answered over his shoulder.

"Ah, Ned o' Bracken Clough gets more like himself every day. A fool of a lad, a darksome dene, a lass with the farmyard sweets about her—hay, bracken, and smell o' the kine—and you've all Ned's story in a nutshell."

Griff checked his mare. "What do you mean, William?" he asked.

"Nay, only what I say. Who the last lass is I cannot tell you, but there'll be one here or there, you may depend on't. And the queer thing is, we cannot just fairly judge Ned as we ought to do. Seems as if he were born to it, somehow, and there isn't a bit of harm in the lad, if once he took to settling down. Besides, the lasses help him—help him cruel, not a doubt of it. And if their fathers or brothers don't think just as kindly of Ned as most of us—why, they're not big enough in the beam to come to argument with Ned." His eyes dwelt for a moment on the horseman's figure. "There's none but you this side of the Low Country could frame to cudgel sense into Ned o' Bracken Clough," he added.

Griff laughed; then, with a nod and a good-bye, he rode up the hill. His first fear had been that Roper had heard some gossip touching Hester, and it was a relief to hear him disavow all knowledge of Ned's present doings. Yet the directness with which this Marshcotes gossip had, all unconsciously, compared his own strength with the ne'er-do-weel's, struck an odd note, as of prevision.

The track grew narrower as he reached the moor, winding between green ridges, past marshy bottoms, across beds of soundless peat. And all the way, though the wind and the larks were singing, his thoughts were with the lonely father at Windy Farm, with the combat that was soon to be decided one way or the other. If he failed—what then? Gossip would spread, sinuous and unclean, from inn to smithy, from smithy to each house in Marshcotes, Cranshaw, and Ling Crag, from these to every farm whose folk had dealings, at kirk or chapel or

market, with the world that centred about Marshcotes. Joshua Royd was wounded in his pride, whatever chanced, as he had said; but the deeper wound might yet be spared him.

Griff reached the farmstead at last—a bare, huddled mass of house-buildings and laithe and mistals, sheltered toward the west by a ragged patch of beech and sycamore. Still with a grave sense of responsibility, a knowledge of all that he had come to gain or lose, he pushed the gate aside and rode into the yard.

Ned o' Bracken Clough was leaning against the pump, his shirt-sleeves rolled above the elbow, his face, unlined as a boy's, showing a sort of lazy introspection. The very look of the man, the good-nature and the sloth of him, seemed incongruous to Griff. Incongruous, too, was the great liking that had always bound himself and Ned together—the liking that would always bind them, whatever quarrel chanced to come between them for the time. His mission would have been an easier one, thought Griff, if this man had been an enemy, or if he had possessed less of that peculiar quality which forbade men to be angry with him.

Big and bluff Ned looked, with a patch of green-blue sky framing his bulk as he lounged against the pump; but, though he had the better of Griff in height, his shoulders were narrower, and his middle had scarcely that firm, round look which makes a scythesman or a wrestler.

Ned nodded a sleepy welcome as his visitor dismounted and fastened up the mare. Then, with an effort, he abandoned the pump's support, and moved, his hands deep in either pocket, towards his friend.

"I was just looking after my bit of a farm," he said dispassionately. "It's wonderful to think what a farm will do for herself if she's only left alone. She's like a woman that way: tease, or try to make her do this and that, and she'll do naught; but let her follow her own whimsies, and she'll fair work herself to the bone."

Griff laughed, then checked himself. "I've come to talk with you, Ned," he began, driving straight to his mark at once.

"Oh, ay? Well, it's more than you've come as far as Bracken Clough to do for many a day. Step indoors, and we'll crack a bottle; for I'm fain to see you here again."

"The bottle will keep. It is about Hester Royd I've come to talk."

Ned grew wide awake upon the sudden. "The wind sits there, does it? What do you know of Hester?"

"*What you know.*"

"She never told you herself, surely? There's been naught between you and her aforetime?" asked the other quickly.

Griff saw that the ne'er-do-weel was jealous, and he augured well from this; for, in spite of all Ned's waywardness and lazy disregard of what the world calls duty, he felt—had always felt, indeed—that the man loved Hester, once he could bring himself to acknowledge it.

"Was there anything between the lass and me?" repeated Griff. "To be sure there was not."

"Let's get a good look at your eyes. I'd like to be sure of that," said the other, coming close to his companion and looking him squarely in the face.

The scrutiny satisfied him, and he fetched a big sigh of relief.

"You were never a liar," he said briefly. "Go on. So Hester told you this?"

"Of course not. Her father told me."

Ned whistled ruefully. "What, Joshua knows?"

"She told him—and rightly, too, since she's no mother to turn to. It's killing the old man, Ned—just breaking him down with shame and misery."

"I'm grieved to hear it," said Ned—sincerely, for he looked up to Joshua in his own indolent fashion, and liked him.

"See you, Ned," went on Griff eagerly, "I've known

you all my life, one way and another. We've poached together, fought together against odds, been friends of the sort that are made by moonlight scampers. I never knew you do a dirty trick before, but, by the Lord, you're doing one now. The lass is different, Ned; she'll take things harder than another might. Marry her, as you are bound to do, and she'll make you a good wife."

Ned stooped to pick up a straw and began to chew it quietly. "You mean well," he said; "and when folk mean well, they're bound to tread on your toes. May be I'm not running straight; may be I know it over well; may be I could like to have Hester to myself for good and all. But it's here, you see; I wasn't framed for wedlock."

"Then you'll have to frame yourself afresh," put in the other grimly.

There was genuine trouble, genuine self-inquiry, in Ned's face. "I'm a poor chap when it comes to thinking," he went on, choosing a second straw with care, "and I'll own I can never see much farther than my nose; but it seems hard, and I cannot get over it, that a bit of liking for a lass should lead to such a moil. Look at me now! Just look at me! Do I look like a chap that could settle down to a wife and what comes after?"

"You've got to, Ned."

"You see, my life has been light and heartsome up to now," went on Ned, obstinately following his line of self-defence. "I know where hares are to be got, and grouse, and now and then a brace of pheasants in the lower lands; and pheasants and grouse and hares are just what you might call life to me—but they take a chap out by night, you'll mind. Now, would the lass be happy with such a lad—should I be happy, tied to a hearthstone all my days? I tell you, we'd fratch like terriers before a week was out."

In spite of himself, Griff laughed. This was the old Ned—the Ned who had done many an unlawful thing, who yet had always shown himself a gay, good-hearted

wastrel, whose one besetting fault was an impulsiveness that often led him further than he had ever thought to go. Griff had come here with a keen sense of Hester's wrongs; but now he began to see another side to a misdoing whose burden did not lie altogether on the man's shoulders. Hester was heedless, too, and prone to lead men dancing after her red lips; it might be that Ned had been tempted more than was good for a stronger man than he. And then again Griff remembered his promise, recalled the growing misery in Hester's face; and he hardened his heart against his comrade of old days.

"You are going to marry her, Ned," he answered doggedly.

"Cannot you understand? It's not that I've aught against the lass, and sometimes I fancy I couldn't live without the thought of her—but it's just because she *is* a lass, and because I'm what I am. As I was saying t'other day, you might as well look to a puff of wind to rear a family."

"You'll have to do it," said Griff.

Ned could be obstinate too, once he was roused—as he had been twice or thrice in the course of his easy-going life—and now he settled into a hardness foreign to his nature.

"I like you, and I shall like you, Mr. Lomax, choose what you say; but I am not going to do your bidding any day of the week you choose to fancy. Haven't I lived under the sky? Haven't I been free to come and go, same as the wind, and none to ask me questions when I got back to Bracken Clough? I tell you, I'd smother if I lived in wedlock."

Griff, knowing the man, had looked for no other result from mere persuasion. He abandoned argument at once, and doffed his coat and rolled his shirt-sleeves up.

"We never had a fight, Ned, you and I," he said. "Do you think you could thrash me?"

Ned began to understand him, and rolled his own sleeves up a little higher. "I reckon I could," he said,

with great good-humour, "though if I can thrash you I needn't go fearing any man from here to Lancashire."

"Then we'll settle it in that way. Is that fair sport, Ned? If you win, I'll trouble you no more about Hester; if I win, you go to-morrow to Windy Farm and ask her to wed you as soon as the Marshcotes parson can get out the banns."

Ned pondered a while, shifting the straw from side to side of his merry mouth. This was an adventure after his own heart, and, if the stake were big, the frolic was still bigger; for, next to a hare, Ned loved a stand-up fight.

"I'll agree to that," he said. "I *should* be safe enough, but there's a toughish look about you that I don't just like. Anyway, let's get to it; I'll stand to my bargain."

They closed at once, and the fight grew hot and quick. Five years ago, before work had given virtue to brain and muscle, Griff would have stood little chance with his opponent, who was skilled in fist-play beyond the crude hammer-strokes of the moor-men; but now his muscles were like well-tempered steel, strong, flexible, untiring. Round and round the mistal yard they fought, till at last Griff got a home-thrust in and dropped the other in a pool of mistal refuse. For a moment he thought the battle over, but Ned was up again, smeared from head to feet with blood and offal, but gay as a laverock in the summer blue.

"I'm fighting for my freedom. Come on, my bonnie lad!" he gasped.

Again they fought, and wheeled, and circled round the yard, and soon Griff received a head-blow that brought a night of stars before his eyes. Another hard blow followed, and he reeled.

"Give up, lad! I'm your master," panted Ned.

But Griff recovered. He was not thinking of Hester's safety now, nor was Ned considering the liberty which was at stake. Fight for fight's sweet sake warmed

blood and muscle of them both; and, as the stinging blows rained home, as the firmament of each man's battered vision grew thicker yet with stars and flitting moons, the song of the untamed fathers was in their ears. Round and round the yard they went, bulky and big and tireless, and neither would give in.

"Will you *never* go down?" roared Ned, as he got in a cut across the cheek.

"No, lad, but you will," answered Grift.

The other leaped at him, intent on finishing the fight before his breath forsook him; and Griff, who had waited for his chance, knocked Ned's guard aside, took a pace or so to the right, and swung his arm round with a blow that might have felled an ox. Ned o' Bracken Clough dropped limply where he stood, and his friend, secure of victory now, made haste to drag him to the pump.

It was long before the steady stream of water began to rouse the fallen man, longer still before he found strength to lift himself and stagger to the house-wall. Yet the old, sunny smile was on his damaged lips, and he looked at Griff with tranquil admiration.

"You can hit!" he said. "Ay, you can hit. Well, it's settled now, and a bargain's a bargain, and I must make the best of it."

He staggered to the pump again, and asked his friend to work the handle; and by and by the man's latent hardihood, nursed, not by farm-labour, to be sure, but by long days and nights of open air, came to his aid. Soon he was able to walk unassisted, and together Griff and he crossed to the house.

"Do you think the lass will ever be happy here at Bracken Clough?" asked Ned, with something near to wistfulness.

"Ay, if you'll make her so. The place only needs a mistress, just as you need a wife, to smooth the roughness out. Make her happy, Ned; every lass is potter's clay when a man once takes to shaping her."

"Well, then, I'll try. I was always fond of He you see," he added sheepishly, "and may be I'm th ful to you for more than a good fight. It was only my queer dread of wedlock kept me from wedding before something happened that we know of. See I'm all of a dither still, and there's a bottle of rum in cupboard. Just shift me to the lang-settle, and g couple of pewter pots down from the shelf."

Griff helped him to the settle, and mixed hir measure which would have sent most men to bed. however, gulped it down in three quick mouthfuls heaved a sigh of great content.

"I'm my own man again," he said; "and by token it's past dinner-time, and there's a rare s yonder bubbling in the pot. Come, we'll dine toget and I'll take no other answer from you."

So Griff went out to cleanse himself at the same pu which had ministered to Ned, while his host made s to change his clothes, and afterwards the two of t sat down in high good spirits to their meal.

"It was a bonnie fight," said Ned, as he lit his a dinner pipe. "Pity there was none to watch us, Lomax."

CHAPTER XXI

A TANGLED WOOING

NED o' Bracken Clough was sore in all his bones on the morning after his interview with Griff. One eye was useless for the time being, and his mouth was badly cut; he could only walk with a limp, moreover, for in his second fall he had turned upon his right ankle and strained it slightly.

Indeed, Ned had nothing of the gay wooer's look about him as he set off to Windy Farm. Another man, indeed, would have waited until time had brought healing and a good appearance in its wake; but Ned must needs take life at a gallop, knowing that to move more soberly was to weary of the pace at once. He had given his promise to Griff to do a certain thing, as the stake of what had been a fair and rousing fight; he meant to do it; yet he distrusted his own power to keep in the same lofty mood, and, like a wise man, he gave no hostages to delay.

Whatever the man's case might be, the day itself was ripe for wooing. The June sun, just starting on his downward climb, was warm and gay; the budding ling swayed gently in the breeze; white clouds lay stretched like gossamer across the swart line of the southward hills. The white-and-sable peewits wheeled up towards the sunlight; the little heath-moths rose from every clump of ling; gorse was alight on benty hillocks, turning the warm rays of the sun to butter-gold.

And somehow Ned o' Bracken Clough, despite his

battered face, despite his limping gait, grew full of the satisfying glory of the day. He was a wastrel first, to be sure; but after that he was a man of tender heart, and he realised, with a suddenness which startled him, all that he owed to Hester. Then, as he mounted the rough track to Windy Farm and felt the breeze blow sweetness and good health into his lungs, he understood that she was loyal, strong, and good for a man's eyes to see.

"By the Heart," he muttered, "she's too good for me, and that's the truth. Queer that I never looked at it that way before."

As he went forward, mounting the rough hills with as much speed as his injured ankle would allow, the same chastened spirit remained with him; he was conscious even of a shyness which was foreign to his experience of wooing.

Farmer Royd was leaning over the gate of the Low Meadow as he went by, with the helpless sadness in his eyes that had come there since first he discovered Hester's secret. Of old he had been a man to waste few moments of a farming-day; but now there was no savour in his work, and only when he slipped away to tend his cows and talk to them did he find solace. Ned, seeing him, remembered that he knew of Hester's trouble; for the moment he hung back, abashed, then told himself, with that easy trick of shifting burdens which was his birthright, that he had come to make amends, not only to Hester, but to Joshua himself.

"Give you good-day, Joshua," he cried cheerily, as he went by; "and it's a day to make a sick man well."

"Ay," muttered Royd, after the other had passed on, "but there's a sort of sickness that naught can cure. 'Tis only fathers—and mothers—can fall sick in that way, I take it, and it makes them wonder what God is doing up yonder in the sky."

His lips—the fine lips, with their power of strength and kindliness—quivered pitifully. His anger had long

since burnt itself away; he bent his head to the lash of fate, and felt the whip-cuts sting, and complained as seldom as might be. But his pride in life was gone, and the name which he had carried manfully for sixty odd years would soon be of no account.

"Ay, the moorside will know it by and by," he murmured, as he turned from watching Ned move up the rise and set his listless arms upon the gate again.

Ned o' Bracken Clough, going in by the kitchen door, found Hester ironing aprons. The girl's face, turned sideways to him as he entered, was dark, resentful, and perplexed.

"Hester, lass!" cried Ned, striding to the hearth and thrusting both hands deep into his pockets.

"Well? Nobody asked you to come to Windy Farm, I take it."

She went on with her ironing, and Ned's shyness grew apace; if he had felt his mission hard before, its difficulties were twenty-fold increased by Hester's mood.

"You see, it's awkward-like," he blundered on. "I'm not what you would call a marrying man—"

"Seems not," said Hester, with a dangerous quivering of the nostrils.

"It's habit, I take it, or the way you're born, is being a marrying man. You'll know that I've had a wildish life, Hester?"

"I've reason to."

"But there's no telling. I've known very sober men who thrashed their wives, or worried them with sermons, or kept them as short of victuals as Timothy's calf was when he tried to rear her on shavings. Now I've my faults, Hester, but they don't lie that way, and may be I would make a fairish husband."

Hester finished the apron she was ironing, then laid the next one on the board and smoothed it out. A red spot glowed in either cheek, but she showed no other sign of anger as she lifted her eyes to Ned's.

"You look queer about the face. Has some lass's father, or sweetheart, or brother, been talking to you with his fists?" she asked, in a voice that was scornful, cool, and bitter beyond Ned's understanding.

He shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, and winced as he came down on the injured member. In the bargain between himself and Griff there had been a simplicity that had seemed unassailable: if he lost the fight, he married Hester; surely that was plain enough. Yet Hester herself had introduced a confusion purely feminine into the plan.

"I had a bit of a quarrel," he said, "and perhaps I'm not bonnie to look at, lass, though that will mend with time."

"You never were bonnie to look at, Ned, but that doesn't concern me either way."

Ned stared open-mouthed at her. He had come to repair a wrong, had come with the certainty that Hester would be glad. Had he not, moreover, found restitution in some measure a sacrifice? Yet she rejected it, it seemed.

"But, lass, I'm not so bad as they make me out to be. There's one here and there, I know, that could tell tales of me; but worse men have settled down before now, and reared fine families—"

"What is that to me?" flashed Hester, with sudden fury. "Do you come to mock me with your talk of being a marrying man, or not being a marrying man, or whatever your lame tale is?"

"I came to see if you'd wed me, Hester, as soon as we could get asked in Marshcotes church," Ned answered quietly.

She had stooped to take a fresh iron from the fire, and now, as she held it near her face to test its warmth, her eyes sought Ned's and rested there with grave inquiry.

"You have been long in wanting me," she said at last.

"I doubted, lass. It seemed a queerish turn in life for a roving chap like myself to take."

"You forgot *my* way of looking at it." There was not so much reproach as weariness in her tone. "Life seems like to take a queerish turn with me, too, for aught that I can see to help it."

"Nay, then, you're past my reckoning. Bracken Clough is a heartsome place enough, and there's money enough, and you'll be mistress of it all."

"I shall not."

Her iron had grown cold again; she set it down among the peats, and took another up, and went on ironing without another word. As for Ned, he was bewildered; and, under his bewilderment, there was a sense of loss, of heartache. For he loved Hester, though not until this moment, when he seemed like to lose her, had he known how real and deep his love was.

"Think again, lass, think again," he pleaded.

"Listen to me, Ned o' Bracken Clough," she said, not lifting her eyes from the ironing-board. "There are two kinds of pride: one's afraid of open shame, and the other is afraid of a shame that isn't open. I've both kinds myself—but the last is stronger by the half. What need I care if people talk? Let them talk. But it's a different sort of shame—one I could no way bear—to wed a man who lets things come to this strait before he can make up his mind to be honest with a lass. I do care about letting you think, day and night, every day and every night of all our lives, that you took me out of pity. Go back to your other light-o'-loves, Ned, and leave me to my trouble, for it's good-bye 'twixt you and me."

A strange, new dignity sat upon this girl who stood in peril of grievous shame. An honest pride and an honest resolve to bear the weight of her own sin were eloquent in the deep voice.

"But I love thee, lass—I love thee."

For a moment she wavered, glanced wistfully at him, then shook her head. "'Tis not to be, Ned. Go your ways."

There was a silence, and then she dropped her iron and knelt beside the table, and, with her head between her arms, sobbed bitterly. And what she was saying to herself, over and over, was that she wanted her mother now beside her. Ah, how she yearned for the mother who would have understood! There was none to understand, except that one dead woman — none to know what the pride and gladness might have been— the pride that was smirched, the gladness that was turned to misery.

Ned, though he guessed not half her thoughts, if any of them, was touched. He saw his own misdoing in a new light; such matters were no frolic, to be laughed away and afterwards forgotten; they could spoil a woman's life, it seemed.

By and by the girl got up. "Ned," she said, and her voice was passionless and cold, "it's strange that men can be free to come and go, here to-day and there to-morrow. Women are not like that. It is stranger, though, that such as I could have been weak with such as you. I think the fairies kissed me once upon a night."

"But, lass, what ails you? If I love you, and you'll wed me, what is there to fret about?"

"'Tis pity, Ned, not love, you're feeling now—besides, I do not love you."

"Not love me—not love me, Hester?"

"Not as I once thought to love the man I wedded. I'm only an upland lass, Ned, but my mother was of gentler birth, as you will know, and perhaps I got fancies from her of a sort I can't just understand. Nay! I'm not blaming you, Ned. You're as God made you, and I'm as God made me, and between us we've blundered sadly. So go, lad, and if I said aught against you just now—why, say it was temper, and forget it."

She looked up then, and surprised a misty look in the

eyes of Ned o' Bracken Clough. Reproach was tolerable, but not this quiet way of speaking to him. It was as if, with a sort of mother-love, she sorrowed for his weaknesses, but could not blame him for them; and her voice, in truth, brought something of his own mother back to Ned, and for this cause the tears stood in his eyes.

"Nay, nay!" said Hester, with a sad laugh. "You're pitying me again—and pity—hurts me, Ned."

He came near to her, his arms outstretched. "Hester, Hester! I can't get on at all with my life unless you'll come."

Her mood changed to hardness once more, swiftly, without reason. She herself could not understand these gusts and calms and eddies that marked her shifting humours. Had she loved Ned enough, there need have been no hardship in this new surrender; but a sudden thought of Griff came to her now—Griff, with his quiet grey eyes—Griff, with his strength to do and endure—Griff, with his power of giving out his hard-earned strength of sympathy.

Hester covered her eyes and moaned; she was in that chill land which men name Might-Have-Been, and it seemed to her, in that dire moment, the land that lies in thirsty nearness to Hell-Gates.

"I'm learning, Hester," said Ned humbly. "I'm learning more than I ever thought to know. Just trust me, lass, and you'll not be sorry."

She was looking through the sunny southward window, with its row of geraniums, scarlet above the deep red of their pots, and suddenly her eyes fell on her father, leaning, as Ned had found him a while since, over the gate of the Low Meadow. She saw the weariness, she realised the pathos, of that stooping figure.

"Ned," she cried, "look yonder!"

He followed the direction of her finger, and he read in Joshua Royd's dejection what he had scarcely noticed when he passed him just now at the gate.

"It has maimed him like a blow," said Hester. "He goes about the farm with hanging head—he cannot speak to me, for fear that he should be hard with me for the first time in his life. He will die, Ned, and *we* have killed him."

This, too, Ned realised. A horror of himself was creeping over him.

"For his sake, lad, I will marry you," went on the girl, after a pause. "Will you have me, knowing that I cannot love you?"

"I'll have you any way, dear lass; and as for loving—you'll learn it by and by."

"You cannot be sure of it; I'll try, and I'll be good to you, and— Nay, Ned! you're not to kiss me now. I can only think of father—father, fretting his heart out by the gate yonder. Let's go and tell him."

Together they went out and crossed the meadow. A lark was singing at the sun; the hive-bees droned their hymns; the lowing of well-tended kine came down the breeze. Only the figure at the gate—the figure of old Joshua Royd, breaking if not broken—was out of keeping with the day.

He lifted his eyes as the pair came down to him; he seemed to wonder what anyone could want with him.

"I'm to marry Hester soon as the parson will agree," said Ned o' Bracken Clough.

The old man stared at them vacantly for a while, as if he had not heard. Then—

"Say that again, Ned; say it again," he murmured.

"Hester is going to wed me."

Joshua was alert now, and his grip was close on Hester's arm. "Tell him, girl!" he cried. "Ay, you shall tell him, for I will not. Let him wed you if he will, but not while he thinks that you're an honest lass."

The girl drew in her breath, and Ned glanced helplessly at her. They had not looked for this.

Then Hester laughed—it might as well have been a sob—and looked into her father's face.

"I had no need to tell him," she answered.

Joshua groped outward with his hands. A mist was before him, and he felt blind and helpless. Then he grew clear of mind again.

"So it was you, Ned?" he cried. "You that I've loved as I might my own son—you that I've given bite and sup to, glad all the while to think that you were a right-hearted lad and a lovesome, though you might be wild. It was you, Ned? Tell me again, for I can scarce credit it."

The hour of Ned's bitterness had come, and he bore it like a man.

"Things done in this world can never be undone, Joshua," he said; "but I love her, and I mean to make her happy."

"And you'll forget my broken days? Forget the pain that's been gripping, gripping, till I thought my heart would burst? There, Ned," he broke off, trying pitifully to fall into the kindly fellowship of old days, "you'll have to be my son now, and I'll have to forget. Nay, you'd best be going! 'Tis not as bad as might be—not as bad as might be—but it will be hard, lad, to get over. You should have come for Hester in a different way, as I came for her mother—trembling in my boots, and thinking myself the lowliest chap that ever walked the moor, and wondering if such muck as me was good enough for her to tread on. But you can never come that gait now, lad—and 'tis your loss, and Hester's—and you must make the best of it, I reckon. But, lad, the pity of it!"

He bowed his head upon the gate; and they left him there, and crept in shame and sorrow up the meadow.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST TRENCH

If Ned o' Bracken Clough had shown an odd appearance at Windy Farm, Griff, when he reached Lostwithens, was scarcely in better case. He did not limp, it is true, but his face was bruised and battered, and the knuckles of both hands were raw.

Griff had stopped, indeed, at a moorland stream, and had washed his hands and face a second time; but his injuries were not of a sort to be effaced even by such cool, wholesome water as sprang from Ling Crag Moor.

Mrs. Nethercliff, impatient when he did not return as soon as he had promised, set off at last to meet him. It did not matter now, she told herself, that pride ought to have rebelled against such eagerness; for pride, between these two, was meaningless.

"Now that we know!" she murmured, as she wandered down the grassy track and plucked a spray of bilberry. "Ah, God, if I had died that night—or if I had gone away, which would have been worse than death—we never should have known."

All her being was wrapped up in his. She knew it, and was glad of it. Thoughts and longings, hopes and fears, the little secrecies which women cherish till their hour arrives—she gave them all to him, and laughed to think how safe they were.

At the turn of the path, just where a wind-bent rowan spread its feathery leafage, she met this man who was all in all to her. He rode stiffly, and more stiffly still he

dismounted when he saw her. For a moment she gazed horror-stricken at his face; then, with an eager cry, she ran and put her hands in his.

"You are hurt?" she cried. "Oh, tell me what has happened."

He laughed, assured of the knowledge which they shared, assured of the happiness that the touch and sight of her brought very near.

"Nothing to fret you, child. I had to fight—in a good cause—and I got rather knocked about."

"Did you win? But then, of course you did," she said, jealous, as every woman is, from maidenhood till age has brought the wrinkles, that her man should be the victor.

"I won, but it was just all that I could manage, lassie. Now, tell me, do I look very—well, in need of repair?"

"Oh, it is dreadful! There's a bruise—a great long bruise—just under one eye, and a cut above your temple, and—you must come quickly and let me bathe your face."

For answer he put his arms about her and lifted her lightly to the saddle. She had not expected the sudden movement, and she protested breathlessly when once she was assured of her seat.

"You—you treat me like a child," she cried.

"Do I, lassie? Well, who but a child—and a foolish child—would have run away *from home*."

"Yes, it was *from home*," she answered simply. And they went in satisfying silence to Lostwithens, and neither of them remembered Griff's battered face again until he had stabled the mare and come into the hut, where Nell was getting ready to brew a cup of tea for him. She turned as he entered, and a laugh, mischievous and tender, escaped her.

"What is amiss?" said Griff, thinking of pleasanter matters than his own appearance.

"Only that you remind me of uncle. He used to come home sometimes, after a night with his keepers,

looking much as you do. He called it 'having a little frolic,' I remember—though I was always puzzled to understand what enjoyment he could find in it."

"Your uncle!" echoed Griff. "I did not tell you, did I, that he came with me the night you went away?"

"What, came to Lostwithens again? He promised to ride over, I remember, and I was half afraid he would, until week after week went by and still he kept away."

"He was pleased to jest about you, though he remembered you only as a little woman who kept her back turned resolutely on him while Hester talked. Indeed, the whole thing was a jest to him."

"He would not have jested had he known who this same little woman was who kept her face toward the fire. Have you thought what must happen if he comes again?"

"Yes; but he will not come—he's not the man to keep haphazard promises of that kind—and, besides, do you care what happens, child?"

She turned, the teapot in one hand, the hissing kettle in the other. "Care?" she echoed, with a low, sweet laugh. "I should care if I spoilt your happiness, as the preacher warned me that I should—but care for uncle's anger? No, I can bear that quite easily now."

Griff waited till she had set down the teapot; then he went quietly to her and put his hands upon her shoulders.

"You are still thinking of what Gabriel said?" he asked.

"Sometimes his words come back to me. He was so sure—"

"Ay, as sure as he is that every man is damned who doesn't walk step for step with Gabriel Hirst—as sure as he is that human folk are sinners by birth and sinners by destiny. Listen to me, child! You're going to put that evening's misery clean away, and you are going to promise me again that, whoever happens to come

sneaking to Lostwithens when my back is turned, you will wait till I am here to answer him."

His vehemence, the rough pressure of his hands upon her shoulders, thrilled Nell Nethercliff. It was not his words, but the mastery, the crude and eager bluntness of his tone, which made her heart beat happily. For Nell, when she gave all, disdained to harbour that self-coquetry whereby a woman hides her love sometimes, and thinks concealment pride.

"I will wait—and you will answer him," she replied, with a steady look into the grey eyes which once had been more far-away than now.

A moment later, as they drank their tea, and while Griff, his appetite keen-whetted by his struggle at Bracken Clough, ate slices—thick slices—of buttered bread, Nell recurred to the disquieting thought which Gabriel Hirst had planted with such care.

"And surely—surely—I bring you *some* happiness," she said, a wistful question in her voice. "You took too little care of yourself before, did you not? You would not always trouble to change wet clothes—you did not eat enough when you were over tired to prepare a meal—you let strange thoughts come to you on winters' evenings—"

Griff set down his cup abruptly. "How did you guess that—about the thoughts which came to me?" he said.

"I do not guess; I know. You mustn't ask me to explain, for I cannot; it is just as if I had sat beside you all those years you were alone and had *listened*, if you understand, to your thoughts. It has been the same since you brought me here at first; I seemed to understand your labour, and, in a dim way, to guess the reason of it; I understood your love of the moor, your love of being apart from the outer world. It was scarcely a lesson that I had to learn afresh—it was one which had been taught me somehow, and forgotten for a while, before I saw Lostwithens."

Griff thought of that night upon the moor, a week ago, when his cry across the waste had been answered by her own. Yes, it was true that they were linked by a bond of understanding and of soul fellowship, which none could explain, which, for all that, admitted no denial.

"Then you know that I committed a great sin—a crime?" he said, after a silence.

"It would be a great one, not a little; yes, I knew so much," she answered quietly; "though I could not give you place and date, and the nature of the crime."

Was this the child whom he had rescued, sheltered? Was this, Griff asked himself, the woman who had been tired out, who had asked only to lean for a while upon another's strength? Clear and sharp the memory of his crime returned; and clear and sharp, to meet the old despair, stood out this late-found knowledge of a strength that would not chide, but help him.

"You would not fear to listen to me if I told you all?" he said. "You would not shrink from me when I had finished?"

"No. I should show you that you were not to blame, or, being to blame, had paid the full price asked."

Her tone was almost matter-of-fact. What he had done, he had done; but the deed, whatever it was, had brought him to Lostwithens—had indirectly brought herself to Lostwithens, too—and since the world began it seemed to have been inevitable, just, that they two should meet together here.

"Come up into the moor. I shall not work to-day," he said, after a silence longer than the first.

Nell Nethercliff felt no dread of what she was to hear, as they went up the slope and reached the sunlit, strong old heath. She was not curious to learn his secret, as once she had been; it scarcely seemed to matter that a ghost was about to be tempted from its grave for her to look upon; she must lay the ghost, that was all, and means would be found whereby to do it. Weak yet in

body, Nell was stronger in courage, stronger in power to give her courage out, than she had been in all her life; for she had lain in Griff's arms, had known the meaning of that exquisite, fine thrill which passed from him to her, from her to him, as he carried her, a weary truant, back to the shelter of Lostwithens. Griff's purpose changed, however, as he turned at the summit of the rise and looked down upon his rescued acres. In one corner lay the acre which yet showed stubborn clumps of ling in token of the moor's last stand—the last stand in a battle which had seen five winters come and go.

"It may be fancy," he said slowly, "but it is very real to me, lassie. I told you once that I should not find real peace until that last acre was intaken? It was a penance, if you like to call it such, which I set myself at first, and I must finish it before—before I am free to tell what caused the penance. Can you wait, child, and let me tell you all when that is done?"

He pointed, with the old gesture, to the belt of intake, and Nell answered truthfully that his good time was hers, that he was right to follow to the end what he had set out to do.

And then their gravity, in some queer way, fell off from them, and, like two children who had slipped from home-trammels and from the parents who would fain have found work for their hands, they wandered at their will across the moor—now stumbling upon a grouse's nest among the ling, now stooping to wonder at the frailty of some heath-plant, which even in this wind-swept land could thrive, finding shelter for its littleness under high, tough heather walls. She was the little plant, thought Nell, with a laugh at the expense of her own foolishness, and Griff—the great stubborn man who walked beside her—was the sheltering ling.

All afternoon they wandered happily, as folk do who have taken Care by his lean neck and cloven feet, and thrown him to the winds. Then, as night began its

stealthy climb up the far, hidden hill of the underworld, they went back to Lostwithens; and Trash, their friend and equal, ran barking on before, his thoughts assuredly fixed on supper.

On the next day Griff set to work again, and he laboured as even he had not toiled since his coming to Lostwithens. Hour after hour he thought only of the task so nearly ended; his certainty, nursed through the years, that absolution could only come at the finish of his work, was with him as he swung each spadeful into the waiting trench at his right hand. Would he not soon be free of the burden heavy to be borne? and then—

His thoughts would break off there, and he would pause a moment, his foot upon the spade, to listen to the laverock's challenge to the sun; and then, for a resting-space, he would think of a woman who was watching him, or waiting for him, at this moment—he would remember, too, that well-won lands must have an heir.

Day followed day, and still Griff laboured ceaselessly. Sometimes the rain swept pitiless, drenching, from out the darkling hollows of the moor; sometimes, as spring mellowed into summer, the sun's heat scorched him as he worked. It did not matter. The trenches lengthened slowly, surely, and were filled up from the next virgin strip of peat; and they showed the moor that victory at the last, as at the first, lay with this man who toiled in loneliness and grievous sweat.

Yet the moor snarled at times, as if it knew the weakness that was coming on the man—coming as surely and as slowly as his band of intake widened. Nell Nethercliff too saw the weakness gaining on him, and Griff himself, though he laughed off the thought, knew that his strength would fail him soon.

"Not yet!" he would say grimly, when the thought pressed hard on him. "Not yet! I'll finish first, and afterwards I'll rest."

The years were telling upon Griff at last. He had

been careless of himself, thinking it mattered little what chanced to his own health so long as he obtained the victory. He had thought little—before Nell's coming—of wet clothes covering a tired body; to work till he could scarcely stagger to the hut, and munch a crust of bread by way of supper, had been an oft-recurring occupation, a pastime almost, with him. And now his debts were claiming payment, and it was a nice question—a question on which the roystering squireens of the moor would have wagered cheerfully—as to whether he could finish his appointed task before his strength trickled out like a stream whose fountain-head is dry.

Had he been alone still, had he lived with mere contentment, not with happiness, he would have conquered, and thereafter died—at the foot of the last trench, most likely. As it was, he worked senselessly, under a strain impossible; for he told himself that he was winning absolution—for Nell's sake. He would finish, and be free to tell his tale to her, and she should judge. And then!

Yes, and then? Why, just this. God was more forgiving than he had dreamed of, and it seemed sure that Nell and he would ride the old ghosts down, as they had ridden down the fox in hunting-days. Then he could rest, but not before.

Nell Nethercliff, for her part, was dismayed to watch the settled vigour, which was almost fury, of the man she loved. She tried persuasion unavailingly; and even she could not be sure whether it were better that he should finish as quickly as might be, whether indeed a spell of rest would not fret him more than actual labour. She did what she could, meanwhile; no evening came but there was hot water ready for his bath, which now he took obediently, while Nell went out on this pretence or that—to milk the cows, to give the mare her lump of sugar, to gather herbs for garnishing some dish. She cooked his suppers, too. with a daintiness which was in

part instinctive, in part the result of many further lessons from Hester—Hester, married now to Ned o' Bracken Clough, though she still came to make Griff's butter as of old.

Moreover, Nell, with the shrewdness of a woman who goes, not by precept, but by love, saw that this overwork showed plainly in the evenings. There was the old sense of oneness, of sympathy, between them; but they talked less, and Griff would constantly move to the window and look out upon the battlefield, as he regarded it, and sigh impatiently because the morrow was not here. So Nell, noting these things, began to mix him a liberal glass of rum and water each night, and tempted him to make a virtue of the habit, and grew pleased as a child when she found the simple remedy effective.

Yet no care could save Griff now; his record of toil was too heavy, his present claims upon his strength too great. A doctor, had one halted at Lostwithens in passing, could have read the signs of coming sickness more clearly than did Nell herself; but no doctor came just yet, and the man and the heath fought on—a battle unequal, but gigantic upon either side. Not for content fought Griff nowadays; a woman's glove was at his heart, and for that he fought—for that, and for happiness, which, like to us all, he wished to claim a day or two before its time.

The end of his labour came upon a summer's evening. Throstles were singing in the little cleft behind Lostwithens where Nell had gathered primroses to lay upon her child's grave. Larks, never-tiring, were praising summer now as once they had belauded spring. A clean, soft breeze, filled full of bracken-scent, came dancing from the west.

Nell Nethercliff, a little vexed that some dish was growing cold, after much preparation, went out to seek the labourer. She saw him leaning on his spade, at the end of the trench which he had just dug, and a great weariness showed in the drooping body and bent head.

"Please come in!" she called. "I have waited far too long for you already."

He lifted his head and smiled. Sick or well, he would know one voice, and thrill to its persuasion. Slowly he gathered up his spade and pick, threw them into the wheelbarrow, then began to move with faltering steps towards the tool-shed.

"I will be ready in a moment," he answered as cheerily as he could.

Soon he followed her into the hut, and groped about him for a chair, and fell heavily into it.

"I'm done, dear lass," he said. "God knows I meant to finish it."

The pathos of his words, simple and quiet as befitted the quality of his long toil, brought a rush of tears to the woman's eyes. She held them back, however; it was her turn now to nurse and to be strong. After a while she persuaded him to get up from the chair, and helped him to the couch of ling, and laid the blankets over him.

"We're changing places, lassie," he said, weakness and dry humour contending for the mastery.

Again the tears pressed for outlet; so kindly and so tender was his glance.

"Have you any pain?" she asked.

"None, save that my head's on fire. Tell Gabriel, when you see him next, that his flames are real—I've heard him preach, you know, at Scartop Chapel—he doesn't spare his flames—"

He wandered off into absurdities, and now the woman saw, with a stab of terror, that his eyes were bright with fever. Alone here in the hut with him, what could she do? And yet this thing could not be true; an hour since she had watched him, working as a strong man should, and now in a moment he was stricken. Each moment the fever gained on him, and his delirium turned first upon the intake-travail.

"Of course it can be done," he cried, with the useless vehemence of fever. "God, how weary I am! But

there'll be light enough for one more trench—just one more. Confound the stones! They keep a man back. Oh, curse it! I'll have to take the pick. There, we are right under it—hoick, lad! *The stone won't give!*"

Nell listened to the sudden horror in his voice, and shivered as he took up the wandering thread again

"It won't give! I can't loosen it. It's a millstone round my neck. Gabriel knows the nether millstone. He's a good fellow, Gabriel, but a hideous fool. Do you hear, Gabriel? Instead of coming here to tempt poor Nell away, why don't you help me to get out the stone —the nether millstone, Gabriel? It lies right in the middle of the trench, and I can't lift it. I try and try, and it slips back again—and others come to join it. See, see, Gabriel, you've brought the moorside down upon us with your foolishness! The stones are rolling, rolling, everywhere—my God, they've covered all the intake up! The moor has won, damn it!—the moor has won!"

Nell dared not leave him, to seek help three miles away at Windy Farm. She dared not stay idly by the bed. It seemed to her that the agony of trying to lift that heavy stone was her agony, too, not his alone.

She went to the door and looked out across this land of singing throstles and rejoicing laverocks, across the heedless ling and sterile peat. God seemed far to seek upon the sudden, but she prayed with all her strength that help might come. And meanwhile the man upon the bed talked on.

"The stone won't budge," he cried. "It's the stone of that big sin of mine, Nell. I thought to lift it, but I can't. And what's your bit of strength, lass? It won't help; you'd best leave me to it."

Even now it was sweet to hear him speak of "Nell." Yet it was terrible to realise that this storm of words was the record of his thoughts and desperate strivings during the past days—during the past weeks, may be. Again she prayed, and again the laverocks mocked her from the primrose heart of the west.

"I can finish it—of course I can—I'm tough," sounded Griff's voice again, as the fever-cycle brought him back again to his first train of thought, or of what stands for thought with men in such a case.

"Will no help come?" cried Nell.

Her prayer was answered at last, it seemed, for round the corner of the mistals came the soft fall of hoofs, and presently a red-faced, thick-set stranger rode to the hut door. The man glanced in surprise at Nell, then shrugged his shoulders slightly. He was ready at all times to put two and two together, but it was not his business to tell the world how clearly they made four.

"I'm Dr. Reddhiough," he said curtly. "I just called on my way home to see Mr. Lomax. Royd, up yonder at Windy Farm, is worse, and I thought it would be a kindness if Mr. Lomax would go up and see to things a bit. He's no daughter with him now, you see."

Nell surprised him by breaking into tears. "You may be in time," she sobbed. Then, with the petulance of a long strain relieved, "Oh, why don't you go in?" she cried. "He is ill, I tell you—ill."

Reddhiough dismounted without a word, and went indoors; and presently the woman followed him.

"Well?" she asked.

"He'll die," said the doctor gruffly, for Reddhiough hated death with a sore hatred, and his temper always broke when his skill had found the limit of its tether.

For a moment Nell faltered, then recovered. "He will not," she said. "You and I—we are going to save him."

Reddhiough looked at her for the first time with real interest. "There's breed there," he thought; "no pluck like that of breed. Poor Lomax will die, all the same—though perhaps I'd best soften it a bit."

"We'll do our best," he answered. "I can stay the night with him, and luckily I've got some odds and ends of physic in my bag. Just stay here, will you, while I put up my horse?"

"The horse must wait until you have done what you can for the patient—or, stay, I will see to it myself. There is a spare stall in the stable."

Reddhiough had already unstrapped from the saddle the case of instruments and medicines without which he never rode far abroad; his practice was too scattered to admit of it, for news of an urgent case at any of the outlying farmsteads might meet him on his outward or homeward journey at any time, and he must be prepared to carry his surgery with him so far as that was possible.

"You can't see to the horse. It will only take me a moment," he said, in answer to the woman whose presence here perplexed him.

Nell's only reply was to point to the hut door, and then to take the bridle in her hand; and the doctor, wondering still at her air of decision and command, obeyed her. Griff was sitting upright now, his eyes—bright and over large—fixed on the window through which a clear view was to be had of the corner of his intake still unredeemed. He had built the window, placed the bed of ling, so that he could wake each morning with the next day's work lying spread before him; and there was something piteous—now that his eyes saw fever-visions more clearly than the scene without—in the thought that he was watching the window, not with healthy foretaste of toil to come, but with passionate bewilderment and sense of his own impotence.

"It's there, fixed and hard—fixed and hard—confound the stone, I say! I can't stir it by an inch," he was saying, heedless of the doctor's footstep. "And all the while that black crow, Gabriel, will keep sharpening his beak upon the stone, instead of helping me to lift it."

"To be sure, to be sure," murmured Reddhiough, laying his red, hairy hand upon the other's forehead with a gentleness no woman could have bettered. "I'll help you to shift the stone. There, are you ready? One, two, three—up with it! Now it's rolling down the

hill—d'ye see it, man? It's nearly out of sight now We're rid of that load, any way."

The power that Griff had to soothe sick beasts was Reddhiough's when human suffering was in case. Sympathy, experience under stress of upland weather and upland harshness, a heart strong to succour—the same qualities were shared by each; and now, as the doctor's voice fell on Griff's ears, as the hairy hands half forced and half persuaded him to lie back again and keep the blankets close about him, he made no murmur. He drained the physic brought to him, moreover, without complaint; and presently he fell into a restless doze.

"Your horse is foddered for the night," Nell whispered. She had come in silently while Reddhiough was preparing the draught.

"What, unsaddled, bedded, and the rest? You couldn't do it," he answered gruffly.

"I learned when I was ten, at any rate. You need not trouble about anything except—except the sick man yonder."

Again he looked at her; slim, small, with the subtle stamp of race marked everywhere, he could not understand that she should be here in this rough hut, that she should be at once so anxious for the patient's welfare, and yet so full of self-restraint; that, above all, she should be able to play groom upon occasion. But then he did not know that she was niece to old Squire Daneholme, and that she had been reared in a school where pride and intimacy with horse-craft went together.

They could only talk in whispers, but Nell had a question still to ask.

"What is the illness?" she demanded.

"Pleurisy on the top, and a good deal underneath that I don't understand. Has he been working outrageously of late?"

"Yes, sometimes till he could neither eat nor rest when he had finished."

"I thought so. Humph! He had some trouble years

ago, I remember, and that has preyed on him most likely."

"He will get better, though you do not think so," said Nell, with an assurance that surprised herself. But she did not tell him that a thing so wonderful, so strong and tender, had come to Griff and to herself, that separation seemed a fable, true, doubtless, of usual folk who loved less deeply, but not of them.

Even as she spoke Griff stirred, then suddenly turned over on his side and looked, first at Nell and afterwards at Reddhiough, whom he regarded with a steady look of recognition. The fever, for a moment, burned less brightly in his eyes, and his voice was no longer loud, but weak.

"So I'm down, Reddhiough," he said. "It took me just a few months too soon—only a few months I wanted to finish all—and—Reddhiough, it's nothing, this. I shall be up again to-morrow. It's devilish important, do you hear? It must be done.—Oh, God have mercy, there's that millstone on my chest again, and neither spade nor pick will move it!"

His brief spell of sanity was over, and again he went through the strict cycle of his late hopes and fears, his struggles to finish what must be done. The precision of his words, repeated again and again as if they were a faithful echo of what had really been, became a torture to Nell Nethercliff; and it was harassing to see that Trash was lying by his master's side, licking his face from time to time and whimpering. Just so he had lain beside Nell in her own sickness; for Trash, though he hated a dead body, had none of the human shrinking from a sick-bed—the shrinking which is akin to fear of our own suffering.

And so the evening passed, while Griff alternately dozed and rambled. Reddhiough would have had the woman get what sleep she could, but she declined. The one gladness that she had was to watch, and wait, and whisper half-forgotten prayers. At three of the morning,

Reddhiough touched her lightly on the arm; she was not asleep, but her eyes were closed, and she was wandering in fancy about the heather-lands which Griff and she had trod together.

"What is it? Is he worse?" she asked, starting up.

"No; he is better."

There was no harshness in the doctor's manner now.

"He will live? I said it—oh, I said he would!"

"He *may* live. There wasn't a chance before, but he was always a chap you couldn't trust to follow the beaten tracks. He has had a big trouble weighing upon him," he added, with a shrewd glance at her, "but I fancy he has a big happiness, too, to keep him going. He should have died before this, and he hasn't; there was a force behind him holding him up just past the worst."

Nell's eyes, luminous with tears, shone full upon the doctor. He had told her in so many words that *she* had given Griff strength when he had none within himself. And the thought sang like music in her heart.

"You are right, doctor," she answered, scarce heeding what she said. "He has a big happiness to help him forward."

Reddhiough nodded briskly. He liked this woman, whoever she was, and however she happened to be there. Whimsies she must have, he decided, since she was a woman, but she was straight and honest and sensible enough to-night.

"Give me a snatch of bread and cheese—anything," he whispered presently. "I have had next to nothing since noon of yesterday."

She got ready a meal for him, silently, deftly, and Reddhiough wondered still more at her knowledge of men's needs when she added spirits and hot water to the haphazard feast. He filled himself a measure, and tossed it off, and filled again before he ate; for he was keeping weariness at bay, and liquor, which might

well have forced sleep upon another man, was a steadying influence with Reddhiough at such times.

The night wore on, until the cold hour came that marked the hurrying dawn. Griff slept with apparent restfulness. Trash lay beside him, twitching a hairy ear from time to time as some hint of action stirred his dreams.

"Don't hope too soon," said Reddhiough, himself a little influenced by the dreariest hour of all the night. "He is relying solely on *that other strength*, as I told you. The delirium will return, and return again; but, if he weathers the next four-and-twenty hours, he's fairly safe."

Nell was about to answer, assuring him of the steadiness of "that other strength" which was her own, when she sat upright on the sudden in her chair, and gripped the smooth oaken arms, and turned her head toward the west. From the quiet without, from the belly of the dawn's stillness, came a wind, peevish and wild, with terror leading it and a snarl in the rear of its flight.

"God's pity, 'tis the Hunter's Wind. It sings for death," she murmured.

Her strength to aid was gone for the moment. She had known the tale of this Hunter's Wind too well since girlhood, and Griff had helped to foster the old superstition.

"Not for his death," said Reddhiough. It seemed this woman had her whimsies after all. "Is he the only sick man on the moor?"

"No, no," assented Nell, clutching at the hope, and careless as to who might die, so long as Griff was saved. "Of course it is not for him—how could it be?"

Yet Griff had awakened. So had Trash. Both were looking eagerly toward the window, and Trash was quivering in every limb. Griff turned slowly round, and, as before, he fixed grave, conscious eyes on Reddhiough.

"Did you hear him, Reddhiough? It's a far cry from Wyecollar to Lostwithens, but the Hunter knows his

own. Trash hears him, too. Well, I must die, that's all—but what will happen to my intake yonder? Reddhiough, they might have let me finish it."

For the first time Nell wished the doctor otherwhere. If Griff had to die, she must be his one companion.

"Let me go to him," she said sharply, as Reddhiough started to his feet.

He hesitated, looked again at her, then dropped into his chair again.

"You'll do more good than I," he said.

Nell Nethercliff, brave as she was, had never needed courage as she did now. Weakened by the superstition which was weakening Griff himself, she had to go to him, and hold his two hands tight, and give him, not the false hope of words, but the hope which comes of another's real faith.

And she was strong, though all her life seemed gathered into one teeming hour—all that she would have of strength to-morrow, and to-morrow, and for long days afterwards.

"He'll do," said Reddhiough, after an hour.

Griff was asleep again, but Nell Nethercliff crept to the door and watched the sun rise over Dead Lad's Rigg, and wondered if her strength would ever come again.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT GLOAMING-TIDE

THE Riding Squire had not gone by for naught, though his message, as yet at any rate, was not for Lostwithens. It was idle, and the moor-folk knew it, to misunderstand, or scoff at, or explain away, that curious, long-drawn-out complaint which sounded now and then in the wind's voice. It was a note, indeed, which, heard once in childhood, could neither be mistaken nor forgotten through the coming years; and when it sounded, men went to market with the knowledge that they would hear of this or that moor-dweller's death before the day was out.

And last night, at the weak and fearful hour before the dawn, the Huntsman had winded his horn again. Past lone farmsteadings he had ridden, past cottages that nestled in their sheltering denes, past the trim houses where ruffling squires slept heavily upon their wine; and his yelping pack had wakened men and women and little children—rousing in all the dread that his message was for them.

It was ever the way of the Riding Squire. For one whose death he rode to foretell, he planted fear in a score of homes; and the wayward spite of him seemed tickled by the jest.

Joshua Royd had heard the note, as he lay the long night through on his bed at Windy Farm, and moved from side to side, and wondered what this new pain was which all day long had lain across his chest. Joshua

heard the note, and, though he cared no longer for life, now that Hester had robbed him of his pride, the thought of death was cold to think upon in this grey hour. He sat up in bed, and fancied that the wild music lingered about his chimney; and a great sweat broke out upon him, for he remembered Reddhiough's grave face when he had called yesterday.

"You'll have to give up the farm-work, Joshua," Reddhiough had said.

"I cannot, and you know it," Royd had answered fretfully.

"Go live with Hester and Ned o' Bracken Clough; you've earned your rest," the other had suggested with rough kindness.

"What, and leave Windy Farm and the beasts that are like own sisters to me? Nay, if I've got to die, I've got to die, and I'd liefer be found working at the end."

Yet at dawn to-day, with the Hunter's summons shrilling about the farmstead, Royd had lost something of his philosophic quiet. He had few sins to repent, and felt rather a wonder than a fear touching the after-life; it was the present, ice-cold breath of dissolution that daunted him.

He lay abed till five, then rose and donned his corduroys with hands that trembled and were slow. As he went into the mistal yard the sun shone pitilessly upon him, revealing, in its strong young insolence, each wrinkle of the old man's face. Joshua Royd looked older than his threescore years and three this morning, and would have looked so without the aid of those pathetic lines about the mouth which had come there since Hester's trouble was made known to him. Hard work had been his lot since babyhood, and the little moor-top farm, intaken once on a day, like Lostwithens, from the rude heath that shut it in, had asked from him the care and toil and pains which age a man before his time. Twelve cows he had, threescore or so of sheep, no more land than was needful for pasturage and for

hay and turnip crops sufficient to fodder his beasts through the long winter; but the moor was always watching, watching, for its chance to win back the stolen acres; and Joshua Royd had none but himself now to fight the daily battle—battle to keep his land crop-worthy, and battle to win bare livelihood from crops and live-stock.

And now, at three-and-sixty, he had lived his life, though he did not guess, as he went out this summer's morning, how near he stood to the last brink. The past night's dread was half forgotten in the warmth of a new day; the sense of caring little for his life was strong again on him. What had he done, he asked—rather with patient wonder than with anger against Providence—what had he done that he should be left alone at the end of right-lived days? Ay, worse than alone, for his daughter had left him with a load of shame to bear.

Joshua was willing to die, and yet he would have shrunk had he known how each step taken by the climbing sun was a distinct step forward, too, for him towards that Door which opens once for every man, and closes tight again, hiding the singing-birds, hiding the smell of the sun on budding heather, hiding the lusty war of hope and dread which is men's joy.

His joints felt stiffer this morning, to be sure, than they had done yesterday; and round about his heart—left weak by fever after fever—there played a curious pain, half numb, half sharp. It took him an hour to do a half-hour's work about the farm; he milked with less than his accustomed speed, though he was tenderer than his wont with the brown-eyed beasts he loved; and when at last he got into the kitchen once again, and sat down to his breakfast of bacon and brown bread, he could find no appetite.

"I'm getting old," he muttered. "I'm worsening fast. It's ill work when a man looks crossways at his victuals."

A vague dread was returning to him. He pushed his

chair back and sat staring up at the bread-creel above his head—the oaken frame, stringed lengthwise, from which his week's supply of oatcake hung crisp and curled. And his dread grew on him, as his eyes dwelt upon these homely matters which he must leave soon behind him, until at last he was forced to leave the house and seek companionship from the sunshine and the dew-tipped fields.

He came to rest, after much wandering, against his favourite bit of wall—that which bounded the Low Meadow—and it was here that Reddhiough, riding up from Lostwithens, found his patient.

"Why, doctor, I'm fain to see you!" cried Joshua, with new-found eagerness for human company.

"Ay," said the other cheerily, slipping from the saddle and giving a keen glance at Royd. "I had to spend the night with poor Mr. Lomax yonder, but he was well enough to be left for an hour or so, and I fancied you might need me, Joshua."

"What's amiss with Mr. Lomax?" asked the other wearily. He seemed too tired to care much what the answer was.

"Touch of pleurisy, and more than a touch. I fancied he'd die last night—but, bless you, Joshua, you all have a way of living, you folk up here, that's cheering for your doctor. Dead men don't fill doctor's pockets, eh? I'm going to keep you alive and hearty too, Joshua, if you'll do just as I bid you."

"Mr. Lomax near to dying!" murmured Royd dreamily. "Well, he'd have missed something if he had died—he'd have missed a sight of moiling and toiling, a sight of aches and pains, and he'd never have known what 'twas to see his children go clean away from him at his latter end."

"Come, come, he'd have missed a thimbleful of joy as well. You wouldn't say life was all aches and pains, Joshua—even I don't, though they're my trade."

"A thimbleful of joy? Ay, there's that much in a

long life, may be—and it comes when you're very young, or not at all. It's thankless to be old, doctor, I tell you—thankless—"

Joshua clutched at his breast on the sudden, and leaned against the wall, and looked at the doctor with scared eyes. Reddhiough was off his horse in a moment and over the wall; and it was plain enough, soon as his brief inspection was over, what the verdict was. Joshua Royd was not deceived, and his late dread seemed softened—rendered pleasant, almost—now that he knew the worst.

"I must die, then," he said. "Well, 'tis like getting up or going to bed—soonest done, soonest over."

"Nay, now. There's hope always, man—"

"That'll do, doctor," said the other quietly. "I know, and you know, and words never buttered bread since Ling Crag was a moor.—Yet it's queer," he added by and by. "One minute here at Windy Farm, with my beasts, and my fields, and my steading—and the next minute—where? Where, doctor? In a worse spot, likely, for changing is never bettering, as I've found things. One minute here, and the next—doctor, what's to come next?"

Reddhiough laughed, to hide a sore and puzzled heart.

"May be nowhere, Joshua; may be somewhere where the land is less lean, and the weather not so surly, and playtime longer than the working hours."

"May be—yet may be not. I was always one to doubt; and I'll say this—if there's no cows in the next world, I'll find time hang heavy on my hands.—Well, well! There's naught at all to be done, I reckon?"

"Keep quiet, and drink some more of the stuff I brought you yesterday, and I'll ride up again this evening to see how it goes with you. Pluck up your spirits, Joshua! I've seen weaker folk than you cheat death before to-day."

But Joshua shook his head, as he watched the doctor mount and ride back to Lostwithens down the ling-grown bridle-way.

"The Riding Squire was right," he said.

Reddhiough would have stayed with the old man at another time; but he knew that his help was useless now, and there was a life—a young life—hanging in the balance down yonder at Lostwithens. Yet, used as he was to choose quickly between the need and the greater need, the doctor felt an unaccustomed regret as he thought of Joshua Royd waiting lonely for the end.

"He'll not be gone by evening, we must hope," he muttered, as he reached Lostwithens and stabled his horse. "I should like to be there to help the old fellow over his last stile."

He went into the hut then, his face as jolly as of old; for he did not mean to add to Nell Nethercliff's burden the disquiet which mention of another's illness brings at these times.

"He's sleeping? Good!" he whispered, looking at the bed. "Has he wandered much?"

"For an hour or more; and then—I helped him to find sleep again."

That was all. She did not tell him that she had been glad of his absence while that hour of fever betrayed the secrets of five years. For Griff's brain had exhausted all interest in that cycle of hope and dread which had dealt only with the longing to get the last acre of his intake finished; his mind had wandered back from point to point of the lonelier struggle that had intervened between his coming to Lostwithens, a broken man, and his finding of Nell amid the snow. And Mrs. Nethercliff had sat, his dry, hot hands in hers, and had listened, knitting his story piece by piece together, putting the sundered fragments into due order of time and place, until, at the end of that hour's fever, she realised, as by no other means she could have done, the strength, the stubbornness, which had made an epic of his long fight against the heath.

Yet his mind had gone no farther back, as yet, than to his first coming here, weighed down by the secret of

his sin. He had described, in vivid snatches, the effort to begin his penance, the temptation to take his life, a worthless burden, and throw it off; he had talked, eagerly, of the gradual return of peace, of the love of land-winning that came to cheer him; but his secret was a secret still, and for this cause Nell was thankful that he slept through the long afternoon, and on until the doctor said he must ride up to Windy Farm again.

She went to the door as soon as he was ready to start, and he glanced down at her with a rude diffidence.

"I was harsh last night, when I told you in so many words that he would die."

"What does that matter?" said Nell, with a tired smile. "He did not die, and now—he'll not die now?"

"Not with you beside him. You have *the gift*, and the Lord knows I've lived too long in the wilds to be as hide-bound as a respectable doctor should. Physic is physic, and care is care, but there's something deeper than my care and physic goes. Yesterday it was a thousand to one against him; to-day the odds are just reversed."

"You have been good to us," Nell said, the tears scarce held in check now that the worst was over.

"Nonsense! It's all in a day's work. But, the fact is, I want to explain why I was such a brute yesterday. I hate to see a man die at all times, and for two nights before I'd scarcely had a wink of sleep, and—"

"Why, you must be dead with weariness," said she, with a growing sense of the man's devotion to his duty.

"Not quite. I've got a safe horse, you see, and I snatch forty winks sometimes while I'm in the saddle."

"You need not stay with him to-night, doctor," said Nell, after a pause. She was thinking that, if Griff had another hour of fever, he might well confess his life's secret, and she wished this secret to be guarded jealously.

"Well, true," he said hesitatingly. "You have learned

all there is to do, and your touch is worth a quart of physic, but—you cannot stand another night of wakefulness."

"Indeed I can. If you were here, I should watch just the same. Please, please, go back to Marshcotes, and get a good night's rest, and come again to-morrow."

Reddhiough pondered for a while. It was certain he stood in need of rest, and he had faith in this little woman's nursing powers. Moreover, there might be urgent messages awaiting him at Marshcotes.

"You've the sense of a man," he said at last. "Yes, I will come again to-morrow."

So Nell went indoors again, and watched; and Griff slept long and deep; and Trash lay beside him on the bed. It was as if the days were back which followed the great snow, save that two of the three firm comrades had changed places.

At Windy Farm, meanwhile, one of his patients was cheating Reddhiough of the last succour he had hoped to bring him. Farmer Royd, after the doctor left him in the morning, had gone indoors, and seated himself on the settle, and fallen anew to pondering on that secret which no man ever fathomed yet in life—the secret that would soon be his.

Joshua was no longer fearful; he was only curious. It seemed strange beyond words, to one who had given little thought to anything beyond the round of crops and sheep-shearing and the rest, that before another dawn had risen over Ling Crag Moor he would be beyond sight and hearing of it all. He fingered his pipe, and filled and lit it; strange, that perhaps he would never smoke again. He looked about him—looked at the old clock in the corner, at the dresser with its modest load of pewter, at the china dogs and the row of delfen mugs that stood upon the mantel. These things were with him now, were his, to keep or sell as he would; soon he would know naught of selling or of keeping.

The sun crept westward, and still the old man sat and pondered. A linnet came and sang on the thorn-bush growing by the door. A peewit cried far off across the heath. And constantly the life ebbed out of him, and pain and thought were growing dumb.

Once again he got to his feet and wandered vaguely round about the kitchen that had sheltered him for three-and-sixty years. He was not even curious now, and awe was stilled for ever on this side of the grave; he was scarcely restless—acquiescent, rather, as an honest man is who awaits a summons and has his answer ready. He moved to the dresser, took down the pewter dishes, rubbed them one by one, then set them back again. Afterwards he wound up the clock. He counted the money lying in the secret nook beneath the settle, and smiled—not with any malice, but rather with a slow, wide outlike on the humour of life's littleness—smiled to think that neither kith nor kin need come to wonder, over the dead man's body, how much the dead man had left them at the last.

"It will be Hester's, the bit there is," he murmured. For now he remembered Hester, not as the woman who had shamed his old age, but as the lassie who was like the dead mother he was so soon to meet, or not to meet, according as the unknown powers beyond should settle.

The sun crept low to the hills, and Royd was weakening fast. He had but the one wish left—just to lie down and let sleep hide from him the end. The linnet at the open door was silent now, and by and by the sun touched the farther rises with his rim. A deep and plaintive lowing sounded from the mistal-yard.

"There are some that will lack me in the days to come," he murmured, creeping to the window-sill and looking out upon the cattle grouped about the well. "Ay, the kine will miss me."

A softened light was on Royd's face. "I'll just wend out and say good-bye, like," he muttered.

Yet he swayed as he crossed the floor, and all but fell; and he sank once more upon the settle.

"Nay, I must bide still," he said. "I must bide still, for sure. Yet I'd fain have talked to the roan heifer again, and the little white cow with her bits of frolic, and yond tricksy black-and-brown that holds her milk till a man's past patience with her."

His strength failed him, though, and he must make the best of it, he told himself. It was only granted him to see, through love-dimmed eyes of fancy, the beasts who had known the touch of his gnarled fingers on their udders. This was Joshua's moment—his moment of poetry, of soul-stirring, come late into a life of sweat, and rain, and frost, and pain of flesh-carrying. Deep love will out in the last hour, and Royd loved his kine.

Deeper the lowing sounded from without, and more distressed; and Joshua Royd sat up, and knew the meaning of the sound, and felt his strength again. The beasts, to be sure, were full of milk by now, and there was none but he to ease their udders.

"Shall I win through with it?" he muttered, as he went slowly out, past the thorn-bush from which the linnet had lately piped his evensong. "The doctor said he was coming by this way at fall of night—but what make of milking fingers has *he* got?" All the scorn of the man of his hands for the man of brains asserted itself. "He can see death in a man's face, and talk of physic, can Reddhiough, but what of that when the little heifer cannot bide for pain?"

He did not doubt his strength now. He picked up the milking-stool from behind the settle, and went out into the yard; and the kine, who had come in of their own accord through the gate that stood open to the mistal yard, looked round at him and lowed in trustfulness.

"What then, my bonnies, did ye think I'd lost my wits, like?" he murmured, smoothing the heifer's dappled flanks. "Nay, lasses, nay, ye might have trusted me that far."

Patiently he milked, though pain and weariness grew heavier on him and he could scarce see the steaming froth that topped the pail; and the heifer, quick as all womenkind are to know another's suffering, glanced round from time to time, her wide eyes moist and pitiful.

"For the last time," he said, when this love-labour was accomplished. "There's neither beasts nor milking-times where I am wending, lass."

He moved his stool to the place where the little white cow, his second favourite, was standing; then to the next, till last of all he settled down to the shameless brown-and-black who held her milk. To-night she was fain to part with it, however, for she had waited over long; and only knowledge of her pain kept Joshua Royd so firm upon his stool.

She, too, was milked at length, and the old man looked across the yard—looked at the gaunt moor, at the last red embers of the sunset, at the curlew wheeling toward the far-off marshes.

"I could like to have had a few more milking-times," he said.

The doctor, meanwhile, had ridden up to the farm door, dismounted and pushed his way inside, with a cheery greeting ready on his tongue. The kitchen was empty, and Reddhiough's bushy eyebrows came close together.

"Fool, fool!" he growled. "Why couldn't he bide still and take what little chance there's left him?"

He went into the mistal yard, and saw a steaming pail of milk—this, and a roan heifer, nosing the prostrate body of Joshua Royd. And somehow, as the meaning of it all flashed in upon a mind as little used to poetry as Joshua's had been, he felt his eyes grow dim.

"A just man is merciful to his beast," he murmured. "He has died well, when all is said—may some of us stand up to death in the same fashion."

But the roan heifer cried in her soft way, and would

not leave her master; and the wild afterglow of sunset paled above the heath.

Nell Nethercliff, watching the sick man at Lostwithens, looked through the window of the hut, and saw the same red fires of sunset fade; she saw the twilight frame the casement round about with neutral grey; she saw the summer darkness fall.

It was then that Griff roused himself, and took up the burden of delirium. Yet his thoughts were centred now, not on Lostwithens, but on the years that had passed before his coming.

Nell Nethercliff went to him, a strange fear, that yet had gladness in it, making her heart beat swiftly, burdensomely. The secret he had all but told her not long ago upon the moor, the secret whose telling he had postponed until his fight against the moor was crowned with victory—this secret would soon be hers. She waited, his hands in hers; and a little wind got up and rattled at the casement.

"Thank God we are alone," Nell murmured.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE YEARS GIVE UP THEIR DEAD

GRIFF wandered pitifully among the scenes of other days; and the woman, sitting at the bedside with his hands in hers, wondered that she felt no dread of what must come. There was some deep stain upon his life; she could not fail soon to hear confession from the dry, feverish lips; and yet she was content, nay, glad, to share his secret now. And her strength lay in this—that to her he was the man she loved, complete and past the reach of question. Whatever his sin had been, it could not touch her love; and this love would find ways and means to halve the burden with him, if not to remove it altogether from his shoulders.

He talked at first of the old Manor House at Marshcotes—not as if it stood, as now, waiting desolate for a master who disdained it, but as though he were living there and could see his mother sitting in the trim, yew-bordered garden, or tending her stocks and double-daisies, or breaking off a sprig of ladslove, as her habit once had been at eventide, and holding it to her lips in token of the husband she had lost.

Nell smiled unconsciously at the picture of his mother which Griff, with disconnected, vivid strokes, was painting. She seemed to realise the mother's tall, gaunt figure, her admirable common sense, that verged on grimness now and then, her deep, abiding tenderness toward all who carried themselves bravely amid the inscrutable, harsh sorrowings of life. And the younger woman

welcomed the mention of the ladslove; it was the solitary trait of sentiment that ran, like a golden thread, through the austerity of a strong woman's widowhood.

From time to time, after a silence which seemed to be full of thought, though his eyes were empty of all reason, Griff would talk eagerly of Lassie, his mare, of wild hunts across the moor, of cock-fights, and the midnight brawls at Wyecollar. He had joined the revellers once or twice, it seemed, and had wearied of their blasphemy.

"No, no, Wild Harry," he muttered once. "I'll poach with you, or I'll fight with you—but I stick at your damned drinking-parties."

Was she too wandering, Nell asked herself? "Wild Harry" was Harry Nethercliff, the husband who had died before he could wreak his last cruelty on her. And now the name was on the sick man's lips, here in the lonely hut which seemed so far removed from oaths and brawls.

"You were always a devil, Harry," said Griff, with the absolute conviction which sounds only in the voices of the fever-stricken. "Just a devil let loose to play among us till your time is up."

Nell glanced sharply at him, but the fever was strong as ever upon him; she had thought, hearing his words, that he must be sane again, and that he had been pondering on the old, if grudging, acquaintance which clearly had rested between her husband and himself.

Already, though, Griff had turned to other memories; and now at last Nell Nethercliff grew sick at heart. She had been ready to face confession of a crime, but not confession of his love for the woman who had been his wife. Minutely, with terrible regard for the least detail, he told her of his wooing, of the happiness of their short life together, of the big, untroubled joy he had in knowing that he was soon to have an heir. And to this Nell tried to turn deaf ears, and could not. This other woman lived once again, raised from the dead by a sick man's words of fire; she lived again, and came between

her husband and the new love he sought; she seemed to be a presence, real and palpable, making the hut too narrow, somehow, to hold the three of them.

Yet Nell remembered by and by how Griff had cried aloud to her not long ago upon the moor, how her own cry had answered his; she recalled the intimate, compelling bond which since that night, without one word of love, with scarcely a caress, had made them one, not two; and she took heart again, for such a bond could not be linked about two people—it was wronging God's whole scheme of life to doubt it—save between the one man and the one woman. Ah, surely she would grant this luckless rival all the tenderness which Griff had given her! Yes, surely, for tenderness was well enough, but the passion which was steadfast as the hills—which, like the hills, had its roots in the wholesome earth, its crown among the star-spaces—this was a heritage which no woman could share with her. All else was but the shadow cast before by this love which had been growing between herself and Griff through all the years of all the ages.

For all that, she was troubled by that oft-recurring cry of "*Kate*," troubled by the follies—young, tender follies—of these two whose life together had been no longer than a honeymoon.

"Ah, God, if he would let the dead past lie!" she murmured.

It seemed as if he understood her, for a sudden quiet followed, broken by a fierce, strained cry.

"You fool! You utter fool! You've a fine, big head, doctor, and I thought well of you once—but you are just a fool. You dare to stand there, and fidget with your snuff-box, and tell me Kate is going to die? *Kate die?* The thing's outrageous. I shall go to her—yes, I shall go to Kate, and whisper quietly in her ear, and *forbid* her to die. What do I care about the child now? Oh yes, I know—I longed for an heir, I prayed for an heir—it's in the Lomax blood to think of the old name

first, and let the rest take care of itself. But now it's different; Kate must live, doctor; I tell you, she must live; nothing else matters in the least."

Round and about went the man's mind, wandering like a ghost among the scenes of a dead long-ago. Then another silence followed, broken by a quiet statement, as of fact.

"She's dead, and now the boy has followed her. Well, it may be my punishment for being a Lomax, for wanting an heir beyond all reason. Kate dead! And I forbade her to go out into the cold! She did not often disobey me when she knew I meant a thing."

Griff sat up and gazed wildly at the moor which showed through the casement.

"Snow," he went on, "a foot deep already, and more to follow. Kate's in her shroud; the boy's in his; and now the foolish moor must needs creep into her shroud too."

Nell shuddered, for she remembered Wynyates Kirk, and the long snow, and another child that had found his winding-sheet.

"It's unbearable," cried the man. "I must do something, or they'll say I'm mad. What was it the doctor told me—yes, to be sure—that Kate had been treated like a dog by yond brute Strangeways before I married her—that she might have been alive and well to-day if it had not been for Strangeways. I'll find him, and—I'll kill him."

The purpose instinct in that brief "I'll kill him" was unmistakable, and Nell fancied that she held the secret in her hands at last. Her eyes were fixed upon Griff's face; her lips were parted; she seemed to be listening to some wild tale told of other folk's mischances—told by candle-light, when the wind blows shrewd without and friends gather round the red peats on the hearth.

By snow-white moorland tracks Griff wandered, and

over pathless ridges, and back again to highroads and to bridle-ways, until Lassie, the mare he rode, was spent with weariness. He was seeking, always seeking, the man Strangeways, and he seemed to find some opiate in the search which robbed his grief of half its sting. And last of all he found him—found him dead of the snow-sleep on the Ludworth road, and past the offices of hate.

"There's a bottle of rum beside him—an empty bottle, you may be sure of that—and the brute is dead," Griff cried. "Well, I must go home again. He's dead, and Kate is dead, and the little chap's dead, and there's nothing left to do."

Again he paused for one of those disquieting intervals which should have been filled up with hard, conscious thought.

"By God, there *is* something to be done!" he cried, with sudden triumph. "What made me forget Roddick—old Roddick, the best friend I have? He's saddled with a beast-wife—a drunken, horrible, dishevelled thing who foams and bites. Hasn't he come to Ling Crag Moor so that he can keep her with a nurse in a cottage near the house he's rented? And isn't his life a hell, just because his fool of a conscience bids him save the woman when he'd better let her die? God, my own life isn't worth a field of last year's stubble; why shouldn't I set old Roddick free?"

At last, and with a sure knowledge, Nell understood. With infinite patience Griff would labour through the details of his story, but the tale itself was hers already. And instinctively she felt a great relief, for this was in some ways a nobler and less searing crime than she had feared.

And Griff, meanwhile, took up his tale afresh. He described how he left the house where his own happiness lay dead, how he set off along the track that led to Bents Foot, the cottage where Roddick's beast-wife waited for a drunkard's end. The track took him

past the house, half farm, half hall, which Roddick had rented for its remoteness' sake, and Griff had halted upon impulse to peer in above the low, wide window-sill. He had seen Roddick standing by the hearth, and with him a girl—a young, slim lassie, eager with her eyes and hands to show Roddick that she loved him.

"I watched and listened," cried Griff hoarsely, "and learned another reason for Roddick's coming to Ling Crag. This girl and he had known each other in the south, had loved each other, and, when her father took her out of temptation's way and brought her to his house among the moors, Roddick followed.—A hard chap, Roddick, in the rind," he broke off, with the meaningless laugh of delirium, "but at heart he wavered like the rest of us. He couldn't live apart from the girl, and yet he would not tempt her to go away with him outright and have done with it. Women are more reckless in these things—"

Nell glanced at him again, to learn if this sick man, who talked deep truths, were not awake at last. But no; he was repeating, like a lesson learned by rote, the thoughts which had once been his—years, years before he came here to Lostwithens to learn another lesson and a sterner.

"Women are more reckless," Griff went on, "and the girl, just as I put my head above the window-sill—there was snow on it, and it was melting with the warmth that came from the parlour fire—the girl was pleading hard with Roddick to take her away. I watched Roddick fight the beast in him. Lord, it was a good fight—a fight worth watching—and he drove the beast against the wall; and the girl—little fool!—burst into tears because he cared for her more than for himself. Then I remembered another beast—the woman yonder at Bents Foot—and my way was clear as noontide. I had nothing to lose—nothing, you understand, nothing, whatever nonsense Gabriel

Hirst may talk—and I could do old Roddick a service. Why should the girl and he be parted, just because a woman, to spite them, would not die?"

Nell Nethercliff, though her fancy shivered at the picture conjured up in such straight, uncompromising fashion, had no other sort of shrinking from the story. She knew what was to follow; but she knew also that the grim deed had been done for another's welfare, not for Griff's own.

"God, how plain it is!" he cried, as if returning consciousness were battling with delirium, as if he understood in some dim way that he was looking, not on a present scene, but on the past. "I can see the sunlight on the snow as I went down to Bents Foot; I can hear the robin singing for his breakfast of bread-crumbs on the rowan tree this side the cottage door. Oh, I crept quietly, you may be sure! When people are alive who should be dead, you *must* creep quietly up to them. I opened the door—but I opened it so gently that the robin never stirred, never stopped his singing—and I went in. The nurse was sleeping by the hearth, and Roddick's wife—a thing of skin and bone and long, sharp nails—came mumbling to me. She showed me the nurse's pocket, where the keys of the corner cupboard were, and I stole them like a thief. I opened the cupboard and took down a bottle, three-parts full of spirit. I remembered—oh yes, you may be sure I remembered—that the stuff was poison unless given by the nurse in rare, weak doses. I was glad to remember, for Roddick would be free now; so I gave his wife the bottle, and—"

A sudden trembling seized on him. His face, dry and drawn before, grew moist. And then he opened wondering, conscious eyes, and a gleam of recognition greeted Nell.

"Have I—have I overslept myself?" he murmured. "An acre does not seem much to cover—but, lass, this intake is slow and hard in the winning."

"It is not dawn yet," said Nell soothingly. "Lie back and sleep."

"I'd be glad to. Somehow, sleep is all I ask for—and I can rest now."

Soon he was asleep, not fitfully at all, but with natural quiet; and Nell knew that he had given his weakness and his sin into her keeping, as freely as once he had given his strength. And in that moment she knew, too, that no secret of the past could come between them now, that they stood secure, owing debts to none but God. There was no doubt now that he would recover—regain the strength which was dear to her almost as his weakness was. He would live, because she waited for his kiss.

The summer's night went by, and the summer's dawn crept rosy-blue above far Cranshaw Rigg, and the summer's morn grew strong and splendid from sapphire west to crimson east. And still Nell Nethercliff sat on, her face between her hands, and thanked the over-watching Powers that Griff's tale had been told in just this fashion. Had he confessed his sin to her that day upon the moor, had he kept health and strength to finish that last acre and to tell her then, as had been his purpose, all might have been far otherwise. At best he could have given her but the plain tale of what had chanced at the cottage called Bents Foot, and his instinct at all times was to spare himself, excuse himself, as little as might be. Fate had taken his tale, and the way of telling it, into its own hands; in delirium no man may lie, and the very sureness of his details—the little touches of time and circumstance, the records of each line of thought and feeling—made the story convincing, understandable.

In and between the telling of the real tale there had been, to be sure, wild bursts of nonsense; fever had brought her phantoms with her—mad, bodiless spectres that had never known reality. Strange fears of falling rocks, of roaring waters, had harried Griff; sometimes

the Brown Dog yapped at his heels with unsubstantial jaws; or, again, he would lift his hand and point and cry out that he saw the dead Squire riding fast to snatch his soul. A touch of Nell's hand on his forehead would drive these lighter fantasies away; but neither touch nor word of hers could check him when he was face to face again with the realities of that dead life of his.

To the woman, still sitting there when the sun had climbed above the top of the low window, there was something awe-compelling in the thought of last night's confession. She could see the man's life, she told herself, in its nakedness; there had been no excuses, nor yet any slurring over of that part of the crime which made for a queer sort of righteousness — for righteousness, since he had done the deed for friendship's sake and for a girl's happiness and honour.

"It is so that God will see us one day," murmured Nell, aghast almost to realise the responsibility of one who has listened to delirium. "Just so we shall stand, not pleading at all, nor covering up the dark places, but telling clearly the things that have been. And surely—oh, very surely—God will be merciful, *for He will know what went before.*"

How could she remove this burden from Griff's shoulders? How could she persuade him that his penance had been worked out to the full, ay, and more than to the full? Above all, how could she teach him, what seemed so clear to her just now, that he stood on the threshold of a life more sane, more happy, more full of the fine power to understand and help his fellows than if he had never sinned for friendship's sake, than if he had never, for his soul's sake, gone into the wilderness to work and pray? These were the vital questions now. Had not she too gone through the gates of sorrow, gone through the sullen, hopeless lands that lay beyond? Had not she learned to be glad of the bitterness and travail of it, knowing that such travail had given her the

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At last she rose, glanced
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possible.

She went a little way along t
ing at the sunlit slopes, where
ropes of mother-of-pearl from
bilberry; where the bracken la
mist too fragile, and too quicl
named dew; where the plover
meet the sun and the larks were
heart went out to the larks ar
to the moor which had brougl
out of anguish might come hap
white Skipton hills showed this
days—the hills which, far off acr
dewdrops and of singing larks,
of their fleecy night-gear
daytime wear

places, and hustling lesser thieves into the gutters. Ay, true; but this stalwart moor, free of the sky and very near to God, knew nothing of such shackles; and a heart that needed freedom for its growth, as Nell's had done, could find full liberty up here.

A thanksgiving, pure as the lark's and as full of throbbing melody, rose from the woman's lips. She looked again upon the happy slopes, she heard the moor-bees humming and marked the tranquil wonder of the sky, as of a child's eyes before its first illusions have been desecrated. Whatever came or went, Ned Nethercliff knew upon this summer's morn that she had learned to live; and, when she turned to the hut again, there was an ache, a great content, a restless happiness, all mingled into one swift certainty that Griff and she would mate before the winter's snow returned.

Griff was still sleeping when she peeped in at the door, and so she crossed to the well-spring, unloosed her hair, and bathed her hands and face in the crystal water. This was the simple way of the toilette at Lostwithens, and when the sun and wind were kind, as now, Nell let them chase away the cool, sweet moisture at their own good leisure.

"You've got bonnie hair," said a voice at her elbow, startling her from reverie. "'Specially when the sun gets in between the brown and finds out every bit of gold. It's soft hair, too, and likelier to handle, I fancy, than my thick coils."

Mrs. Nethercliff turned with a smile, soon as she recognised the voice.

"Good-morning, Hester. You're early, but not quite the first to be abroad at Lostwithens."

"How is *he*?" asked the girl, nodding towards the hut.

Nell, looking more closely at her, was aware of a great sorrow and a great fear in Hester's candid eyes.

"He will live," she answered briefly.

"Thank God for that—though why I should, I can't

rightly say. If he's dead I lose him, and if he's quick I lose him; and I'm safely wedded now, and ought to think of likelier matters."

Hester had known well enough that her love for Griff was no secret from the other; yet only in this moment of sorrow, following a great shock, did she allude to it so openly. Nothing mattered much, was Hester's thought, and confidence seemed easier than reserve.

"You're married, and happily married. In a year you'll have forgotten all this folly," said Nell, a little sharply.

Hester set a hand on either shapely hip in the old, self-reliant way. She looked strong, and wild, as a creature of the heath, standing there with the trouble and the fierceness in her eyes.

"Ay, it was folly," she said; "but does that help me? Does a word wipe out the days and nights of longing? Listen, for I'm going to be a good wife to Ned, and you'll not hear me talk mad-fashion twice. Listen! *You* love him, you think? Well, I pray that you love him well enough to lie down for him to trample on, if the fancy took him—well enough to take a kick or a blow from him and like it better than another man's kiss—well enough to serve him hand and foot and think your work is so much pleasure. If you don't love him in that way, he'll lack something all his days, for he's made in that sort of fashion, and if you do love him in that way—God pity you, for a man has queer ways of throwing love about as if 'twere cheap as mud."

The girl's absolute sincerity, her free avowal of her folly, splendid in its recklessness, moved Mrs. Nethercliff to give her truth for truth.

"I love him in that way and in all other ways," she said. "There's no corner of my heart but he can enter in and make himself quite sure of what is hidden there."

For a moment they stood facing each other.

Truth, as clear as the sunlight on the heath, shone

from underneath the mask which women wear against each other; and truth showed, not the glow and tenderness of passion only, but the live, wild jealousy which, since the hills grew solid from the solid earth, was woman's portion, which will be her portion till the hills lie level and the valleys rise to meet them.

"I was at Windy Farm last night," said Hester presently. She was quiet now, as if the stress of feeling had yielded to the one frank confession. "It seems an ill time to be talking of love and life, when father is waiting for his shroud up yonder."

"How? Your father is dead?" Nell asked, her sympathy awake again.

"Yes. He has been ailing lately, but I never looked for such a sudden end."

"I remember—the doctor said something of it when he came."

"And you forgot again? Naught likelier, seeing there's only one man in the moor whose death would kill you. But it's true that father's dead. The night before last I woke and heard the Hunter's Wind, and somehow I couldn't shake off the thought of Windy Farm. When I got to sleep again, it was only to dream of father; all the night I was fighting something that was trying to hurt him, and in the morning I said I'd go to the farm as soon as I had given Ned his breakfast. But there was the butter to be made, and this and that to do about the house, and it was near to gloaming before I got away at last. Well, I came to Windy Farm in time to see father lying in the mistal yard and Mr. Reddhiough standing above him with the queer look he has when dead folk have cheated him. Somehow or another we carried the body indoors, and I made the doctor leave me, and I sat the night through, with a rushlight and my thoughts to keep me company. And it seemed like as if we'd killed the old man, Ned and I between us."

Not a word more; yet Nell understood, beyond the

power of any words to tell her, what had gone to the making of that night-vigil. She knew Hester's fault, knew something of the way in which Joshua Royd had taken up his load of shame. All her heart went out, not to the dead, but to the living—the living, who need our tenderness so much because they are less wise, more helpless, than those who have unfastened the strong, rude bolts that bar Death's treasure-house.

"Hester," she said gently, "I listened to a tale not long ago—the tale of a man's sinning and a man's steady fight for absolution."

"You've learnt *his* secret, then?" said Hester, with that instinctive turning towards Griff's hut which showed her own secret plain enough.

"Yes. And I want you to understand that *nothing* matters once it is done and past. Though the world seems black and empty—though we seem to have left everything undone that should have been done—though the dead get up and curse us, Hester, we must cast them off. I tell you, Hester, so long as we are allowed to live, there's something to be done with life. We were not meant to eat our hearts out in a graveyard."

Hester did not answer. The hope—nay, the promise—of forgiveness for the worst, awoke an answering thrill in this girl who had spent a night, of God knew what self-loathing, with the dead man whose end, through her own doing, had lacked its rightful peace.

Slowly she went up the moor, and not till the sun was well past noon did she return. She found Mrs. Nethercliff watching by the sick man, who had awaked and slept again during the talk beside the well-spring.

"I only came to tell you—that I will be a good wife to Ned," she whispered. "May be, when the children come—and Ned will be a good father—may be then I shall forget—forget the look on father's face, and forget—Mr. Lomax yonder."

She was gone as silently as she had come; and tears rose to the older woman's eyes. Hester was not nineteen

yet, and she had learned so much. Nell Nethercliff breathed a prayer—one of those eager, selfless prayers which carry healing with them—that Hester, too, would one day find her peace, as she herself had done, as Griff was doing now.

CHAPTER XXV

SQUIRE DANEHOLME RIDES TO WYECOLLAR

SQUIRE DANEHOLME, on the day when Griff finished his last trench, and staggered to the hut to claim the wages of overwork, had ridden out to the Herders Inn, which fronts the roadside just before you reach the old carriage-road that leads, between grey gate-stones first, and then between two banks of wild rose and honeysuckle, to Wyecollar Hall. The Squire had come on no more important business than the buying of the spaniel which he had spoken of to Griff not long ago; but the landlord of the Herders chanced to have foregathered with some kindred spirits early in the forenoon, and by the time Squire Daneholme had drawn rein at the inn door, and stamped his way inside with the fine, free bluster that became him, Jabez Earnshaw was so far past discretion that his tongue wagged about matters remote from the purchase of a dog.

Now, though Nell Nethercliff was the Squire's niece, and though it was believed throughout Wyecollar Dene that she had been driven out of doors by her husband's people and had perished in the snow, none had dared speak of what they knew to the old Squire. For Daneholme's will ran better than Queen's law from Saxilton to Lancashire, and it was common gossip that the Squire had quarrelled so desperately with Mrs. Nethercliff that any man who spoke of her in his hearing would earn a cracked crown for his pains.

Jabez, however, knew no fear this morning, and he told

himself, as he poured out a measure for his guest and another for himself, that "Jack was as good as his neighbour," and that, for his part, he could talk as freely to a squire as to a ploughboy. So, when the Squire nodded at him over the top of his glass, in token of the "drinking-luck," and asked how the world was wagging in this lonely spot, Jabez scratched his head and looked curiously wise.

"Oh, it wags, Squire, it wags, and that's the most you can say of any world," he cried. "To be sure, we're a bit too throng with boggarts up hereabouts."

"The Hunter, you mean?" laughed Daneholme. "Well, I've neither seen nor heard him, for my part, but I'll believe you Wyecollar folk when I do."

"I wasn't just thinking of the Hunter," said Jabez slowly. "There's another ghost sprung up on the moor they say—what you might call a young ghost, seeing the flesh was quick on it not many months ago."

"Put some more liquor into yourself," advised the Squire, who was in rare good humour this morning. "You've had either too much or too little, and either case is bad for a man."

"Nay, I'm only telling you what all the moorside knows. There's one here and there has seen her, and they all agree that she walks at gloaming, with a sort of bluish mist about her and the ghost of a dead child in her arms."

"Damme, that's good!" roared Daneholme, not prone to superstition. "The child will weigh light, at any rate, if it's a ghost. And who may this woman be who haunts the moor, Jabez? She's Wyecollar born, I hope, or you'll have to summon her for trespass."

"Well, she isn't just Wyecollar born," said Jabez Earnshaw, with a quick upward glance. "Her name was Mrs. Nethercliff—young Mrs. Nethercliff."

"What the devil do you mean?" The Squire was red with passion now, and Jabez felt a little of his liquor-courage disappear. "What do you mean, you drunken

fool? Mrs. Nethercliff is my niece, and a niece of mine is not going to be food for your cursed gossip. If you want more ghosts at Wyecollar, Jabez, just pick them from the commoner sort, and leave good names alone."

The Squire's character was to be read like an open book when his mood was gusty, and the landlord was not slow to note how the stubborn pride of race leaped out on the least excuse. Jabez had resented this for many years past, and now he found a keen pleasure, as weak men do when they meet their masters, in rubbing raw the wound he was able to give at last.

"I only told you what everyone is talking about," he went on. "'Tis not for me to stop a ghost, high born or low, from walking."

"But my niece is alive," sputtered Daneholme. "How can she walk, as you call it in your blank tomfoolery?"

"There you're wrong, Squire. Your niece is dead, and she's never been buried; for yond Nethercliffs just turned her out of doors when the big snow was on, and she was lost among the drifts, and she walks up and down because no one has found her body, to give it Christian burial."

Jabez had meant to hurt the Squire, but he was aghast at the success which greeted him. At first the old man had lifted his riding-whip as if to strike him; then his arm had fallen to his side, and he had lurched towards the table and sat down upon its beer-stained edge.

"*Dead*, do you say? Dead, Jabez? You're—you're a liar."

"May be, may be not. But Mrs. Nethercliff went out into a snow that a strong man couldn't have crossed, and, as I say, her body was never found. There, Squire, there! I shouldn't have spoken so sudden, like—"

"You shouldn't have spoken at all," said the other grimly, "but a fool is measured by the length of his tongue. Good-day to you, Jabez."

He was in the saddle and away before the landlord had recovered his wits; for a great sorrow was in the Squire's heart, and he wished to be alone. Forgetting the dog,

forgetting even that he had had any errand at all to bring him to the Herders Inn, he turned his horse's head toward Ling Crag and rode at a foot-pace up and down the winding hills.

"Nell dead! Nay, it is not believable," he muttered once.

Fierce as the quarrel had been between them, the old man loved his niece, had always loved her. More than once in the past few months he had thought of reconciliation; but reconciliation implied that he had been more or less in the wrong, and the Squire had never yet made such an admission. Headstrong, kindly, tyrannical, he had stormed his way through life, and now the storm was buffeting him in turn. Nell was dead; she could not thwart him now; and it was scarcely treason to his pride, since she could take no advantage of it, to acknowledge that the fault had not been hers alone.

He began to picture what her life must have been with these people of her husband's who had driven her forth; for the godly elders of the Nethercliffs had once been known to him, and he had quarrelled with them so bitterly that, even when they thought that Nell was dead, they would not send him any message.

"Poor lass, poor lass," the Squire muttered, as he breasted the rise this side of Ling Crag. "I once spent a day with old Nethercliff and his wife, and I said that another time I'd choose purgatory instead. Poor little high-spirited lassie—if she were here again, I'd make it up to her. I'd own I was harsh. I'd—"

He was riding through the village now, still at the same quiet pace, and Betty o' th' Nab, standing at her doorway, saw him approach. Betty, prone by nature to regard an ounce of malice as more precious than a pound of charity, had her own special grievance against Squire Daneholme; for the Squire's ne'er-do-weel son had once come wooing Betty, and she had tricked the young fool into a promise of marriage, which, when the father heard of it, was broken by simple and effective means—

a horsewhipping, namely, of the son, and an interview with Betty which lasted ten minutes by the clock.

Betty o' th' Nab remembered that interview. She grew hot with shame as she thought of it this morning; and then she grew cold again, and quiet, as she recalled certain gossip of the moor.

"Good-morning, Squire," she said, moving into the middle of the roadway so that she blocked his passage. "'Tis a fairish while since we met, but, by the Heart, I've not forgotten you."

"Who are you?" asked the other bluntly. He was thinking still of Nell, and this woman's face was unremembered for the moment.

"Betty o' th' Nab,"—with a mock curtsey,—"the same who would have been young Mrs. Daneholme by now, Squire, if you had not spoilt it all."

"Oh, you're Betty o' th' Nab?" said the Squire, in the tone which had earned him many enemies. "Well, I've only one word for you, Betty o' th' Nab—you can go to the devil. Meanwhile, you may loose my horse's reins, for I am riding to Saxilton."

"Wait a bit, Squire, wait a bit. There's more dies of hurrying than hunger, as the saying is, and I've a bit of gossip for you. It's fine to be proud, Squire, and to bluster and cry cock-a-doodle all across the moor; it's fine to come taking a lass's sweetheart from her, with talk of a family name and what not. Ay, but what of family names now? There's a niece of yours living pretty-come-kiss-me-quick with Griff Lomax at Lostwithens."

The blow was quick, cruel. But the Squire said not a word. He was thinking of that night when he had sought Ned at Lostwithens, of the little figure by the hearth—the woman who had kept her face so sedulously averted. She was of Nell's height, and even at the time had struck him with a vague sense of familiarity.

Squire Daneholme, piecing the two stories together—the landlord's story and Betty's—could find no room for

doubt. A moment since he would have given the half of what he owned to know that Nell was alive; now, he would have given all to know that she was dead—*safely* dead, as he put it to himself. It was for this reason that he said no word to Betty o' th' Nab, for he was in those under-deeps of rage where a man fears his own worst instincts.

"To be sure, I'm only a plain farmer's wife," went on Betty, serene amid her triumph, "but I *am* his wife, you'll understand, Squire."

The Squire's voice came hoarse and dry. "Woman, let go my bridle," was all he said.

"And why? Nay, I've wanted a talk like this for many a day—ever since you called me—"

Squire Daneholme just cut his horse across the withers, and Betty, surprised by the beast's sudden leap, lost her loose hold of the bit and all but fell into the roadway. But the Squire went on unheeding; and from Ling Crag to Saxilton, hill or level or slack, he galloped till the grey was blanketed in foam.

"Yond's Roger Daneholme," said one to another as they met him on the road. "Ay, 'tis Roger. He's tried for sixty years to break his neck, and, by the Heart, he's framing better than ever now to do it."

The Squire's first impulse, soon as he reached Saxilton, was to gallop back to Lostwithens and have it out with the mad couple who lived there, defying pride and decency. But he was old, and not so strong to rally after a shock as he had once been; he would put off his visit till the morrow, he told himself. The morrow, however, brought reaction, and for once Roger Daneholme set himself to act, not on impulse, but on prudence. Remembering his grief when he thought Nell was dead, he was more slow to wish her three times dead, as he had done yesterday, rather than know her to be living at Lostwithens; and for a whole week he schooled himself to let the first anger die, lest by hastening to Lostwithens he should say more of those words,

not to be recalled, which had so often bidden fair to wreck his life. He would go quietly, with an open mind; if Griff Lomax had to be killed in the result—well, he would kill him, but not without good reason.

So the Squire argued against his own impulsiveness; but he did not guess that, deep down under all, there was a sure conviction that Nell—his dainty, winsome Nell—could never stoop as low as his own thoughts had done.

"I'll ride over to-morrow," he said to himself, when the week was ended.

And, oddly enough, he felt almost light-hearted, though he strove to nurse his gravity. He was holding himself in check, for the first time in a stormy life; and the repression did not gall him.

"Yes, I'll go to-morrow," he repeated. "Confound the pair of them! The thing must be looked into—undoubtedly the thing must be looked into. Gad, it's monstrous!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BROWNIES SEEK LOSTWITHENS

GRIFF, during the week which Squire Daneholme had spent in self-repression, had come to sanity again—to sanity, and to a weakness which showed plain in the thin face and wasted hands. The doctor, used as he was to these wasting fever-bouts, which soon or late no worker on the land escaped, was startled by the quickness with which the man had lost flesh. It seemed that the fire of years, close-hidden until now and smouldering, had leaped out, minded to atone for past repression. Weak as a little child Griff lay; only the eager heart of him was alive, and that was fretful at the thought of wasted time.

Day after day he lay on the bed of heather, and there was no sign of returning strength. But one sign there was, and Reddhiough was quick to see it.

"See here," he said to Nell one afternoon, after Griff had fallen into a restless sleep, "you know my hobby by this time, eh? Worry is at the root of most ailments—and worry is certainly at the root of his. D'ye see how his eyes turn always to the window yonder when he's awake? He can see that unfinished bit of intake, and to my thinking he can't rest for wanting to be at it. It was that he raved about, you remember, when the fever took him first; and it's that which is keeping him back now."

"Is it dangerous for him to lie there, getting no better?" asked Nell quietly.

"Yes, it is. A man must be moving one way, bettering or growing worse—and Lomax there is certainly not bettering."

Nell Nethercliff was silent for a moment. She knew, as Reddhiough did not, why the sick man could not rest, with the unredeemed, rough corner of his intake looking up at him each time his glance rested on the window-space. This was the penance he had set himself, and the thought was preying on him that he had not won his way as yet to peace.

"Doctor," she said at last, unwilling to share any of Griff's secrets with another, yet knowing that she must give Reddhiough all the help she could—"doctor, suppose he had a fancy about that unfinished corner of the intake?"

Reddhiough's thick eyebrows came together—a trick of frowning that he had when light began to penetrate his treatment of a difficult case.

"That would explain a good deal, if the fancy were deep-rooted," he said.

"It *is* deep-rooted. He has lived upon it—fancy, or reality, or anything you care to name it—for five years. He thinks he cannot find peace until the last of the work out there is finished."

"Humph! He was always an obstinate mule when he got an idea into his head. He'll not give it up now, weak and all as he is—no, not if you, and I, and all Ling Crag, proved to him that he was wrong."

Reddhiough glanced at the sleeping man in great perplexity, although he knew that, somewhere to the rearward of his mind, there was a good scheme taking shape.

"We must find a way to cure him of the fancy," he said; "it is his only chance of turning the corner. The man's sound enough; all the Lomaxes are; what he most ails is just what you have said—this fancy which won't let him get his strength again."

Griff chanced to wake at the moment, and straightway

sat up on the bed, his eyes upon the intake which had filled his dreams.

"There's so little to be done," he muttered. "Scarcely two months' work. It's damnable to lie here like a log and see it laughing at me. The moor will say it has won the battle, after all.—Oh, you can go to the deuce, Reddhiough," he broke off, as he turned his head and saw the doctor standing close beside him; "you say I'm not fit to get up, and I say I will get up. Man, you don't know what hangs on my finishing that corner."

"Yes, I do," said Reddhiough. "Here, Lomax, give me a hand-grip; you could always make me wince, couldn't you?"

Griff's hand fastened on the doctor's, and he strove to bring the loosened muscles into play. Once he could have brought the skin off by mere pressure, but now Reddhiough only smiled at the weak grip.

"That ought to show you, Lomax. Lie still a while, man, till your strength comes back."

"Yes, lie still!" Griff echoed fretfully. "It's so easy, Reddhiough, isn't it, when you can't afford to lie still? Can't you hear the moor laughing at me? I can, and it drives me mad."

The way of rescue, faint and ill-defined, grew suddenly distinct to Reddhiough.

"Lomax," he said, "suppose the brownies tripped across the moor by night and finished that bit of work for you?"

"Suppose you were a man of sense, Reddhiough? One notion is as likely as the other."

"But suppose they did? Would that satisfy you?"

Griff, his eyes unnaturally large and dark, looked up into the other's face and smiled with wan derision.

"Yes," he said; "if the brownies come—good Lord, Reddhiough, you don't seem to know what it all means to me. You've been at the bottle, man; it was always your big failing."

Nell glanced anxiously at the doctor, expecting to see

shame and anger on his face; but Reddhiough only laughed, for he knew his own failings as well as he knew his neighbours'—and that was saying no little.

"Always," he assented cheerfully. "Well, perhaps the brownies did creep out of the bottle.—What, you're sleepy again?"

"I am never aught else," muttered Griff; "and I think I'm going to be quiet a while—and then the dreams come—and I'm sweating at the intake all afresh, with the big nether millstone planted full in the middle of the trench."

He was half dreaming already, and soon he was asleep again. And Reddhiough, before he said good-night and mounted the horse which was waiting at the door impatiently, told Mrs. Nethercliff what he had in mind.

"It may be the saving of him," he said; "at any rate, I can promise there'll be no lack of helpers."

Nell nodded gravely. Sure as she was still that happiness must come to Griff and to herself, secure as she stood in her new-found faith—the faith of the winter heath which waits for summer and knows its certainty—she was troubled, feeling her helplessness to aid.

"When he gets better," she said, as she watched Reddhiough swing into the saddle, "I shall tell him all that you have done for him—the sleepless nights, and the long rides when you were too tired to sit a horse—"

"Tush!" growled Reddhiough. "Tell that to the brownies when they come. The man's my friend; I want to save him, that is all."

Nell watched him ride out into the heath, with the deep, brooding silence of the sky above him. She listened to the long-drawn wail of a curlew, roused by the beat of his horse's hoofs. Then she turned to the hut again.

"That is all," she echoed. "He sums up his life in much the same easy way, I fancy, but I know what he has done for Griff—and Griff, too, shall know one day."

She closed the hut door, patted Trash—who was uneasy nowadays to see the master sleeping so constantly

in working hours—and then sat down before the red-eyed peats. Her thoughts were the wind's thoughts, ranging far and near; but one and all returned to the same groove—that neither in sickness nor in health could Griff and she be less than married. Last of all, before she made her simple preparations for the night to be passed in the big chair, she took a piece of matting that lay in one corner of the hut, found a couple of nails and a hammer, and fastened the matting so that it covered the window. Gentle as the hammer-taps had been, they stole into Griff's dreams, and he began to mutter restlessly.

"What is the noise yonder? *Tap-tap*—O God, it's the pickaxe striking on the nether millstone. I can't get out the stone; I never shall; and the moor is grinning with its black, greedy jaws and telling me I hadn't reckoned on the millstone. Nell could move it, if she would; Nell's like the larks, and the warm sun, and the purple that comes over Bouldsworth Hill at gloaming. I should love Nell—if I dared; but I dare not, now I've left the task unfinished."

Nell held her breath. For the first time in many days he had spoken her name; for the first time in their lives—save for his wild confession on the night of her leaving Lostwithens—he had told her that he loved her; and though she had known it well, it was a good word to hear.

"Nell will help me with the stone as soon as she can get to me; then I shall finish, and the stain will be wiped away, and I can tell her everything. Yes, I promised to tell her everything; she shall hear the tale, and then judge me. Poor lass! 'Twill be a trouble to her, I fear."

The poor lass, though, was smiling softly as she watched him sleeping; for, when he came to his strength again, there would be no need for him to tell his story—they would stand, he and she, on the threshold of the future, with need for no backward glances at the past.

Reddhiough, for his part, had ridden straight to Ling Crag; and never during the years of his rough, kindly service had his intimacy with the moorland ways of thought, the moorland springs of action, shown to better purpose. He was moor-bred himself, or he could not have hit upon a plan of rescue which was at once so simple and so sure of acceptance by the dwellers in Ling Crag.

He sought Ephraim Shackleton first, and found him rejoicing in the absence of Betty o' th' Nab, his wife, at her father's farm.

"Good-day, doctor," said Ephraim lazily. "I'm all alone to-day, and so I reckoned I'd just make a holiday of it and never touch a bit of work. 'Tis not every day a man wins free of his wife."

"True, Ephraim, true," cried the doctor, with his big laugh. "Luck comes to all of us, eh, if we wait long enough for it? All the same, I want you to work to-morrow, and I came to ask you about it."

"Eh? You want me to work? What at, doctor? I'm not what you might call skilled at your sort of work."

"May be not; but you know how to take in a piece of moor."

"I should by this time. Well? Have you taken a fancy, like Mr. Lomax, for making a new home for yourself?"

"It is Mr. Lomax himself I want you to help. Do you remember the day you all worked at shovelling a path out of the snow, Ephraim, so that your wife might have her wish and be buried at Trawdon?"

"Ay, I remember. She was a good lass, the first 'un —just how good I never knew till Betty took me in hand and began to comb my hair with a three-legged stool, in a manner of speaking."

"Well, you'll not have forgotten that Lomax worked as hard as any two of you that day; and now *he* has taken a fancy into his head, just as your wife did about

the burying, and I want you and every stalwart Ling Crag lad to help him as he helped you."

Ephraim, still puzzled, shifted his pipe from the right to the left corner of his mouth, then examined a cake of manure that clung to one of his boots. "Well?" he said at last.

"Mr. Lomax has been nearer to death than I like to think of, and though he's better now, he has taken this fancy into his head—the fancy that he can't be well again until the last corner of his intake is finished. Call it a whim, if you like, Ephraim; but it's a fact that he'll die if you and your mates don't come and help him."

Again Ephraim was silent. Never quick to make a promise, he was reviewing the farm-work which was waiting for him on the morrow. The meadow-grass was needing the scythe a full fortnight earlier than usual; he had meant to tackle it to-day, in fact, had not Betty's absence made a holiday incumbent on him.

"Ay, I'll come," he said at last. "I don't deny there's a fairish bit of work waiting for me, and 'twill be the same with many another that I know. Still, Mr. Lomax worked for me without being asked, and I'll work for him. Besides, though he's taken to mad ways lately, doctor, we've all got a soft spot in our hearts for a Lomax of the Manor."

"That's the humour, Ephraim!" cried Reddhiough, slapping him on the back. "Now I'll go to half the men, and you'll go to the other half; and to-morrow we'll all make a start."

"You're going to handle a spade too?"

"To be sure I am. I've no bad cases on just now, except Mr. Lomax's, and it's all in the way of curing a sick man."

Reddhiough had made no mistake when he had counted on his volunteers. From man to man he went that evening, and from man to man went Ephraim Shackleton, and there was not one refusal. All had urgent work of their own awaiting them; well, it must

wait, and afterwards they must press two days' labour into one to make up the lost time. Even the ne'er-do-weels—men who were content to stand and smoke amid their dirty, ill-kept farms and dream of work to be done to-morrow, always to-morrow—even they were eager to put hands to spade in the interests of a friend who needed them.

At five of the next morning, under a round, white sun, over a moor fantastically gay with mist and shimmering dewdrops, a company of some fifty men, each with a spade and a pick across his shoulder, walked sturdily towards Lostwithens. At their head was Reddhiough, redder of face than ever, and full of jest and laughter.

"He's a good one to go, is the doctor," said Ephraim Shackleton to his neighbour, as they neared Lostwithens.

"Few better, lad. It's all day and every day with Reddhiough, and I've never known him slacken. Well, we're here or hereabouts. Seems he's chosen a lone spot, has Mr. Lomax—lonelier even than the gossips made it out."

Tale and jest were stilled when they reached the lower gate that opened on the intake.

"We'll have to work quietly, lads," Reddhiough had said. "If once he gets an inkling of what we're doing, he will be wild to be up and digging with us."

So they fell to in silence, and in silence, save of pick and spade, they laboured through the long, hot day. Each man had brought food and drink with him, but they took few intervals, and short ones, between the spells of their love-labour. Sometimes one of them would look curiously at the hut, and remember the gossip touching a woman who lived there; but a Lomax was a Lomax, after all, privileged from times of old to play queer pranks, and no man let himself dwell too eagerly on the hope of catching a glimpse of this stranger-woman who did not show herself.

Within the hut, Nell sat by light of the peat-fire—

since the window was close hidden by the matting—and listened to the faint ring of pickaxes without, and held herself in readiness to explain, persuade, or threaten, if Griff showed himself refractory. Yet she could not keep her glance from wandering to the window-space, and Griff noticed it at last.

"Why have you covered up the window, lassie?" he asked suspiciously.

"The doctor said it fretted you to see the intake; besides, the light is not too good for you just now—you would rest better, he thought, if the sunlight were kept out."

"He is right, I daresay," muttered Griff wearily. "So long as I can't work, Nell, I'd better not see that bit of land; it grins at me so devilishly."

She was relieved to find him so quietly accepting the new arrangement; yet an hour later, when he had seen her glance towards the window again, he laughed in a way that roused fresh apprehension. What if he saw through the doctor's trick before that last corner of the intake was redeemed? He might do anything—might even force himself to rise, and get into his clothes, and hasten out to help his friends. Any folly was possible in Griff's present state, and Mrs. Nethercliff wondered if, after all, this plan of Reddhiough's had been a wise one.

"You hear it, too?" said Griff. "You hear the tapping of the picks as they strike that nether millstone? Well, I've heard it for many a day past, all through the working hours. You see what comes of wasting time with a sick man, Nell; you're beginning to share all his fancies."

"Yes, that must be it," she answered quietly. "I *did* think I heard it—and that is a foolish thought, is it not, when we're all alone here?"

"Unless the brownies have come, as Reddhiough promised," put in Griff, with tired irony. "What a fool that man can be, Nell! It's the bottle, I suppose."

With another sigh of relief she watched him doze

again. Clearly he was so far recovered that he knew he had had delusions; he was growing doubtful of what his waking senses told him, interpreting them by light of the fever-visions that had left him weak; and in this doubt his safety lay.

The fifty men were working with a will, meanwhile; and when, towards evening, Nell ventured to lift one corner of the window-covering, she saw that half the sterile land was broken up.

Reddhiough looked in at the end of the day's work, after the men had set off for their homes again, leaving picks and spades behind in readiness for the morrow's labour.

"Well, how has he taken it?" he asked, nodding towards the sleeping man.

"He heard the pickaxes, and thought that he was dreaming. Doctor, if only he will keep in the same mind till all is done!"

"It will be done before to-morrow night, at any rate. Lord, how those beggars worked!"

"And how a certain Doctor Reddhiough worked, if his face be aught to go by," murmured Nell, with a smile that brought a dimple into either cheek.

"You mean I'm sweating like a brock, as we say up here? Well, that's true—but I fancy, between you and me, I've saved my patient. All turns on how he takes it when he gets his first sight of the intake."

"And you'll have done quite soon to-morrow?"

"Yes. It made me feel queer, just now and then, while we were working, to think of the weeks and weeks it would have taken Griff to do what fifty of us are knocking off in a twinkling. I never measured before, somehow, what these last years of Griff's have meant. The man's a fool; the man's got grit; teach him sense as soon as he's strong enough to learn it."

Reddhiough was off with that, leaving his blunt and unmistakable advice to Nell's consideration.

"Teach him sense?" she echoed, with another

dimpling smile. "Yes, surely, that's all I pray to do."

It was strange to see how these days of nursing had brought out the latent youth in Nell. Anxiety there had been, and at least one moment of despair; but she was near to Griff, nearer by far since his strength, his dogged aloofness, his resolve to do, not what God willed, but what he willed, had all gone under this great wave of sickness. In health she had loved him; in sickness she came near to worship. And so the dimples gathered in her cheeks again, and the light danced in her eyes, and the slim, pretty figure moved briskly to and fro, doing the welcome tasks for Griff.

Toward five of the next afternoon the workers had finished their task and had gone away, asking no thanks from the master of Lostwithens, yet conscious of that warm, quiet feeling which comes to men who have worked hard for friendship's sake alone. Griff Lomax, lying there and fretting because he could not work, was dearer to them even than he had been in the old days; they had given of their strength, and the gift came back to them, increased and sanctified.

It was Ephraim Shackleton, plain of speech and thought at most times, who voiced the feelings of the company as they halted at the hummocky spur of moor which soon would hide Lostwithens from them, and turned for a last look at the hut.

"We've called Mr. Lomax 'fairy-kist'; we've thought it was just a bit of a whimsy took him to Lostwithens. Well, lads, could any one of us have delved for five years there, with scarce a soul to speak to, and none to give us wage or praise for what we'd done? He will come back among us soon, I'm hoping, for a man that can do what he has done is one we can't afford to miss."

There was poetry in Ephraim's halting and half-shamefaced words; he, too, had looked, as Reddhiough had done, at the wide, intaken fields, and he had gauged the value of that silent toil as none could do who had

not himself turned many a trench. His thought, too, was Reddhiough's thought that Griff might well have been a fool, but that there was a stature and a breadth about his folly which lifted him above his neighbours.

"He's had one soul to speak to lately, if all I hear be true," put in a comrade, whose outlook, like Betty o' th' Nab's, lay chiefly on the sordid side of life. "Ay, Mr. Lomax may have notions, but he's found a tidy wench to share them, so they say."

A growl went up from these rough farmward folk, and again it was Ephraim Shackleton who spoke for them.

"You can stop that sort of talk, Eli," he said, with his usual lazy drawl. "Such chaps as you couldn't live that way, I'll own, and give never a handle to gossip; but Mr. Lomax can, and we'll thank you to keep a quiet tongue in your head."

"Ay, ay," growled the tired workers.

And Eli said no more; the final verdict on Griff's life had been given by his old-time acquaintance, and the verdict, now and in the years to come, would hold his honour and the honour of Nell Nethercliff as staunchly as if their own good name were in the balance. That was the way of Ling Crag; its judgment might be right or wrong, but to that judgment it stuck with steady, dogged perseverance.

Squire Daneholme need have had no fear for Nell's good name could he have heard their talk; but the Squire, who had meant to ride over to Lostwithens to-day, was kept to the house with a fine, upstanding attack of gout, and could do nothing save sit in his chair, and drink port wine in the face of his physician, and curse impartially the man or woman who rashly came into his room.

Nell Nethercliff, after the doctor had said good-bye, had sat and watched Griff as he slept. That troublesome corner was finished now, and on the result of his first sight of it depended all. Towards evening

he awoke, and his eyes wandered, as of old, to the curtained window. Should she tell him now, she wondered? Cowardice said "wait," but courage bade her take down the matting, for nothing was to be gained by delay.

Slowly she unfastened the curtain, and Griff, with a cry, sat up and looked at the finished plot of ground, which now showed yellow and lumpy as the remainder of the newly-broken ground.

"It's finished," he said, in a dazed way. "Nell, am I wandering again? Come and look out, and tell me if you see what I do?"

She went obediently to the window. "Yes, I see what you do. The work you set yourself is done."

"By whom? By whom?"

"By the brownies, surely. Did not Doctor Reddhiough stake his word that they would come?"

"I'm not a child," he put in impatiently. "Weak as I am, I'm not a child, Nell. Someone has robbed me of my right; it is mine, that bit of land, and everything depended upon my finishing the work myself."

She came and sat beside him, and her cool, soft hands claimed his.

"I will tell you a story," she said—"a story of a man who went out one winter's day and found his neighbours digging a path from the snow; he helped them, because a dying woman had asked to be buried at Trawdon; it was not easy work, and he laboured harder than any two of the other men."

"It was nothing—I did not know you had heard of it—"

"I've heard many things to the credit of this man I'm speaking of; he does not guess how many. Well, he had set himself a penance, and he was struck down just before he finished, and the help he had given to his neighbours was returned to him. That is all; it was *his own work*, do you understand, that came back to finish the intake for him?"

Griff looked at her with suspicion, curiosity, hope all mingled in the steady glance.

"Child, you don't know how I had *willed* to do the work, the whole work. If a single trench had been left to dig, I should have been beaten by the moor."

"This man I was telling you about," Nell went on, smiling mischievously at him, "this man had learned two of the big lessons of life—the lesson of sorrow and the lesson of work. But somehow he had missed the third lesson, big as it was, until fever robbed him of the power to work."

"And what did he learn from fever?" asked Griff, smiling a little, too. "He learned to be weak, and restless, and ill-tempered—but what else?"

"Ah, he has not quite learned it yet! But he will do soon, because I am bent on teaching him. The lesson is just this—that no man secure in his own will to plan and his will to carry out the plan can play God's part—that any man who tries to do it is pulled up sharp at some corner of his life, and either sinks or learns to profit by it. Now, am I as good a sermon-maker as our black crow, Gabriel Hirst?"

Nell Nethercliff, with her daintiness, her humour, her abiding sense that the world would yet be well with Griff and with herself, was irresistible. It was not merely that she said the thing which was true; it was the warm, sweet way she had of giving colour, brightness, life, to truths which, with another rendering, might have jarred upon a brain so nicely poised between the balance of sanity and thraldom as Griff's was now. On one side was the rooted faith of years, that only by his own toil could the finishing of the intake bring him peace; on the other side was Nell, and Nell was too sure of their love to fight any but a winning battle.

"See!" she said softly. "The sunlight lies so peacefully on your intake. There's a lark singing 'Victory.'

Cannot you realise that you are *free* at last? Is it for nothing that the sky and the moor and the birds are glad that you have won? Oh, surely, surely, you can see it with my eyes for once."

There was a silence, tremulous with the singing of the lark without. It seemed to Griff as if a physical weight was lifted from him, as if he had stripped after grievous toil and were bathing in that crystal-hearted stream which men call the Waters of Absolution. And then again it seemed he clothed himself afresh, in garments smelling of lavender and all old-fashioned, comely herbs, and went to meet his bride. And yet again he lifted his eyes to Nell's, and she read a message there that in itself was marriage.

"Child, you are right. I am free," was all he said.

And the lark went singing on, and the sun dipped ruddy towards the west; and these two sat hand in hand, and made their peace with fate.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT WYNYATES KIRK

THE heath had changed its coat once again before Griff, weak still and glad of Nell's arm to help him up the steeper slopes, was able to get beyond the precincts of Lostwithens. The ling no longer showed a sober green, half covering the gnarled blackness of its stems; the fulness of its year and the glory of it had come at last, and mile after mile the moor lay purple in the sunlight, while the great velvety moths, the russet heather-bees, the glinting dragon-flies that crossed from one watered dingle to another, played constantly between the naked sea-blue of the sky and the changeful purple of the heath.

Changeful the colour was, indeed, for scarcely a clump of ling showed the same shade as its neighbour. Purple-red, purple lilac, lilac paling almost to a perfect white—there was no limit to the caprice of the varying tints; and, when the ling flowers yielded ground for a space to the rounder bells of heather, a deep, strong red, with scarce a hint of purple in it, looked upward at the sun.

It was a Sabbath morning, and in great content the man and woman wandered through their wonderland. Sometimes the heather rose knee-high on either side the track; sometimes—this was where the ling had been fired not many seasons since—it stretched in short, crisp undulations, pleasant to the feet; but, knee-deep or ankle-high, the purple sheen was over all.

"Nell," said the man abruptly, "do you know what it means *to live*, after lying very near to death?"

"I should know," she answered, with mingled gravity and mirth. "Is your memory so short that you have forgotten the long nights you had of watching, after the snow-sleep came to me?"

"Why, no, I had not forgotten—but you are so strong now, child, and it seemed foolish to think that you could be feeling what I am feeling now. To smell the heather-winds again, Nell—to hear the peewits crying—to see those Skipton hills sitting grim and tranquil in the middle of the sky—lass, it is sweet, when one doubted if they'd ever gladden one again."

"You doubted?" she said wonderingly.

"Ay, I doubted. I was very weak, Nell, and I knew I had not finished my work—it seemed I never should finish it."

"But you never told me that you—you feared death."

"Fear him? No, I didn't fear him; but I hated him, and just lay, and waited for his coming, and cursed him in a gentle way—I wasn't strong enough to be anything but gentle. Sometimes it was hard to bear—for death meant losing you."

"You should have told me. Oh, indeed, you should have told me. I—I could have helped you, dear."

"Where was the use? I had to die, I thought, and the less said about it the better. But now—see, Nell! There's a curlew drifting down the wind and wailing—see his long beak, and the way he slopes down toward the ground—and a hawk is waiting for his dinner over Dead Lad's Rigg—Lord God, how good it is to come back and see the old familiar things."

Her hand crept into his, without her knowing it, and together they stood—the big, wide-shouldered man, and the little woman who, for the moment, was the stronger—stood, and watched the sunlit heath, and heard the psalm of thanksgiving sung by the wind as it struck the purple bells of ling. It was the Sabbath, and they were

at worship in that Green Church which God made in the first days, the church where many men have worshipped, to their souls' health.

As they watched, a new thought came to Nell—the knowledge of a truth which long ago Griff had learned from long Sundays spent upon the moor. Down yonder, in the busy valley-ways, it was easy to know the Sabbath by men's quietness and their broadcloth; but here, too, Nell realised that, if one had senses tuned to spaces peopled by the wind, the birds, the beasts, the marks of Sabbath quiet were also plainly to be read. There was a peace, a mellowness, not to be described, which never was attained by working days; the lark sang in a more religious key; the very hares lopped with a soberer gait. Once Nell would have laughed at the conceit as fanciful; but she had lived long on the moor with one who knew the moor's last secrets, and to-day the explanation of it was clear as the sunlight shining on the purple slope of Dead Lad's Rigg. For God, the woman told herself, informs not only the minds of men, but the instincts of the beasts, the birds, the flowers, the trees, and running streams, and this Sabbath sense which He has given them is an equal miracle with the swelling of the spring-time buds, with the growth of herbage to its full leaf.

"It is the Sabbath," was all Nell said.

Griff nodded quietly, and there was friendliness and understanding in the long glance they gave each other.

In silence they went up the moor until the jagged edges of Wynyates Kirk showed just above them. By chance, it seemed, their wanderings had brought them to the place; but neither the man nor the woman named it chance, as they stood before the gaping cleavage of the stones in which Nell—Nell and her dead child—had sheltered long ago.

"It was here I found you, Nell."

"Yes, and, somehow, there's no pain left—no pain at all."

"My happiness came to me that day," Griff went on

simply, yet in the voice of one who is about to risk a desperate hazard. "My happiness came to me, Nell—or something different, perhaps—it is for you to judge when you have heard my story."

Her happiness, not his alone, had come that day, thought Nell; it was coming to them now, lusty and quick and wholesome, from the heart of the sun-ripe moor; she thrilled to the man's touch, she let her love look out at him from the clear, candid eyes which always in his mind he likened to two crystal pools, lying in sunlight and in ferny shadow.

"I have heard your story," she said. "You need not tell it to me."

"But, Nell, you do not understand. I was guilty of a great crime once, and I must tell you of it. I must, for my own honour's sake and yours."

"You told me when the fever was on you—and not the crime only, but your whole past life. Listen! I could describe the Manor House to you, and the Manor garden, and the mother who kept the lads-love green in memory of her goodman—I could tell you of—of your marriage, and of all that went to the making of the crime. You have nothing to confess, dear, nothing."

A sigh, as of one who casts aside a burden, came from the man.

"I know nothing of what I said; but, if you know all, I can ask you what I meant to ask you when my tale was finished. Could such a man ask any woman to share his life?"

Again the truth shone steady in Nell's eyes. "If she loved him, yes. And if he could give her all—the best and the worst of himself—yes."

Still Griff held himself in check, though his pulses leaped as wildly as the lark was singing overhead.

"Don't play with excuses," he said, in the tone she remembered well—the self-regardless, quiet tone of their first days together. "It is easy to say that it

was no murder—that I only gave the woman drink and let her do the rest — but it was murder all the same."

"Yes, it was murder of a sort," the other answered steadily — "murder done by a man distraught with suffering and hardship, who did not know that he could help his friend at too great a cost to his own peace."

"I knew what I was doing," said Griff.

"In a fashion, yes. It does not matter. You asked me a question, and you have your answer. If the woman loves him—yes."

"Yet the stain—the cursed, lifelong stain, for the woman and himself to bear!" Griff broke in desperately.

She rested one hand lightly on his shoulder and pointed, first toward Lostwithens, then to this and that far dingle of the moor, each hiding its farmstead.

"Look back," she said, "look back upon the life that went before the crime and on the life that followed after. Which is the better? Before, you were careless; nothing mattered very much, did it, so long as you had food and drink, and a horse to ride, and boon-companions to poach and fight and racket with? And afterwards? You rescued good land from the heath; you built farmsteadings; you spent your money on Farmer Shackleton yonder at Deep Clough, on Farmer Emmott there at Broomy Heights, and kept good men from ruin; you learned to see God in the sky and the ling and the peat —you learned, last of all, to know your weaknesses— you learned, my dear, to be a man after a woman's heart."

Griff was watching her in sheer astonishment. His burdens, against his will, seemed slipping one by one from him. It was not her words, eager and straight to the point as they were, that cut the soiled past away; it was something deeper, more spiritual, that went from her to him.

"Do you mean that a woman could forget?" he said.

"Yes, and remember, too—remember how the man came out of that bitterest despair of all—despair of one's own making. Not that it matters, as I said. If the man had done nothing to redeem himself, if he had stood shivering in the midst of his own helpless misery, he could still claim the woman—if she loved him."

That was all. Instinctively they let the past sit by its dead and give what tears were needed; for their part, they owed duties to the future—that strong, young future who was not afraid of life. Instinctively, too, Griff set about unwrapping the frugal meal that they had brought with them. It was a relief to turn to the body's wholesome needs and satisfy them; for the future, unlike the past, needs body-cheer.

And when their meal was done, they lay among the heather, and were silent, and took great draughts from the sky's brimming cup. The certainty of God, the sure, slow honesty of nature, the privilege men have to labour and to see the fruits of their toil, the mystery that lies at the heart of life and gives to life's rude details their breadth and depth and spiritual fragrance—these things were plain to Griff on this Sabbath day which saw him coming back to strength. His own life, at long last, was in step with nature and with a sane humanity that neither denied its limitations nor its powers. At long last he was a man in the world of men—men who toiled and suffered, doubtless, but who were also well content.

Nell Nethercliff, lying, as Griff was, among the heather, was thinking of nothing save the love that comes to a woman when she finds her mate; yet this seemed enough.

Ah, the gladness of it, as they listened to the lazy bees and watched the heat-waves flickering over gorse and ling. A sober, fearless gladness, it was, strung through with threads of human passion, and it gave to the least gnat that danced amid the sun-rays a purpose and a dignity. Perhaps they did not know it, but it was the

other's keeping.

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"Good-day, Lomax. Good-day, Nell," he said, with dangerous quiet.

They turned, but neither shame nor guilt was in their faces. They looked as the heath looked, happy and at rest, and Squire Daneholme, though prepared to bluster, knew instinctively that the record of their lives together might be shown in all men's sight.

Nell, as naturally as if the years of bitterness were cancelled, went to her uncle's stirrup.

"I have wanted so long—so long—to see you again," she said.

He looked down at her, his mouth twitching, though he meant it to be hard. This was his little lass, grown bonnier, surely, since he saw her last.

"Damme, I came at the wrong moment, though," he answered gruffly.

"No, you came at the right moment. I am happy, uncle, now—and—and perhaps I should have let pride creep in if you had come at another time. I'm not proud now at all—except because of this big happiness—and I want to tell you that I was wrong to leave you, wrong to quarrel with you—"

The Squire was nonplussed. He had come with assurance of a fight, with a possible forgiveness to follow; but this meekness of his niece disarmed him ludicrously.

"So was I—so was I," he broke in. "I've been a wry-necked fool all my life, Nell—I'm more of one than ever just now, for the gout hasn't left me quite, and it's purgatory to sit a horse—yes, by God, I've been a fool—you've had a devil of a time of it, eh, lass, and I, who loved you, never stirred a finger."

"It doesn't matter, dear—nothing in the world matters now, except—except this odd happiness I've found."

Squire Daneholme, not to be balked altogether of a battle, turned on Griff.

"You've had my niece at Lostwithens for months, you puppy," he snapped. "I come here to find you kissing

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you will be riding back through Marshcotes. Who could be better than you to take our names to Parson Shaw and have them called?"

The Squire pondered awhile, then slapped his leg and gave his great bull's laugh. He had to yield to this importunate pair, and he had better yield with a jest on his lips than grudgingly.

"I'll do it!" he responded, to Griff's surprise. "He's a solemn-faced rogue, this parson, and he'll have heard of you, be sure—the solemn folk have a way of hearing gossip—and his face will be good to see when I walk in and tell him what my business is."

"But, Squire, I was only jesting—it will be easy to ride over myself—"

"Oh, you were jesting, lad? Well, it's never over safe to jest with me, for I've a way of turning it to earnest. As sure as you stand there, meaning to marry Nell—and I'll wring your neck, Lomax, if you don't—I mean to see that look on the old parson's face. There, I'd thought of going forward to Lostwithens, but I'm not wanted now. I'll go to the parsonage instead. Goodbye, you young pair of fools, and if afterwards I know you when I meet you on the road—well, 'twill be straining a point."

Again Nell came to his stirrup, and held the reins before he could jerk them tight.

"I am sorry for the—for the lost years," she said. "Oh, uncle, can't you guess how I have loved you, needed you, though I would not give in?"

He stooped to pat her roughly on the shoulder. "Ay, I know, lass, for I felt the same. Why didn't you marry Lomax at the first? He's worth ten of that Wild Harry we quarrelled about. You're fools, the pair of you, but you'll get on—and—well, it's no far stride to Saxilton, eh, when once you're living at the Manor?"

"We may never live there, uncle."

"What? You'll be content to stay on in this wilderness?" cried the Squire, in evident amazement.

"If he wills it, yes."

"Gad, you're tamed, Nell; that's all I can say. Good bye, lass! We'd better not quarrel again, for it hurts us both."

She watched the burly figure, mounted on the big grey horse, recede among the far, quiet spaces of the moor; and then she turned to Griff.

"He has forgiven me," she said. "Dear, it is good to be forgiven—and when—when—but I forget," she broke off, with the first touch of coquetry that she had shown to Griff—a coquetry which even now she half despised. "You talked of marriage to uncle; but did you tell him that I had not given my consent, nor been asked for it?"

"True; I had forgotten that," said Griff soberly; "nor did I tell him that the sun was warm and the heather-bees all droning. Perhaps he needed no telling, Nell."

Then on the sudden this first, careless mood of love-foolery was lost completely. Their eyes had met, and his masterful, close grip was round her once again; and singing larks, and droning bees, and all the wide heath were forgotten.

It was not till they were moving homeward, with the sun lying round and red upon the ridge above Wyecollar, that Griff spoke of what was in his mind.

"The Squire asked just now if you would be content to live at Lostwithens. Well, would you, child?" he said.

"Oh, take the answer I gave to your other question—do you remember?—if the woman loves, *yes*!"

"But would the woman care for it, apart from being just content?"

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "Men never age, somehow, in knowledge of a woman. Cannot you see that where you are is home—that your land is my land, and your people my people? Oh, the shame of these confessions that you make one give! But it is true; I

love you, and in any place, in any weather, in any health or sickness, I want—why, just you, my dear."

Generous in all things, truthful in all things, Nell would not conceal the value of the gift she brought; and the wonder of that gift was new upon the man, so that he doubted if his happiness were real.

"Just this I want to say," Nell went on, after a half-mile's silence, "and it has nothing to do with what I wish myself. You have finished your task; there are other duties waiting for you at the Manor House; these folk of Marshcotes and Ling Crag have learned to saddle certain obligations on you, as they did upon your father and his father before him. Are we justified in living here at Lostwithens, just nursing our own happiness?"

Griff did not answer for awhile. Poor Joshua Royd, dead of toil and heart-break now, had given the same counsel. Gabriel Hirst had said as much, and so had every friend of yore who had claimed him lately for a gossip. And now Nell herself was urging him to do what, in his own heart, he knew to be the right.

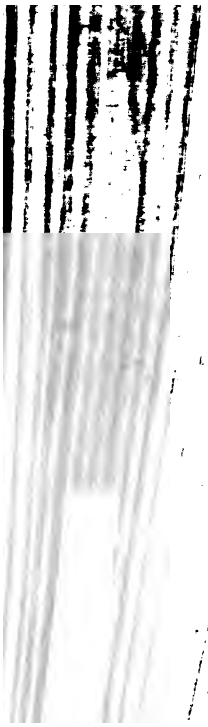
"And Lostwithens?" he said doubtfully. "Are the fields to go back to the moor?"

"Why should they? There are farmers striving to make poor lands pay, and failing; let one of them have the farm, rent-free—it shall be your wedding-gift to me—and we will come sometimes and live the old life again."

"Lassie, you're right; but I shall miss it."

"Shall I not miss it, too? There's no place in the world can be to me what Lostwithens is, and yet—and yet—oh, surely, you must go back to your own people, and I must help you to keep up the honour of your name."

From out the past there came a call to Griff, a call that was clear and unmistakable. His debts were paid; he could walk again with his head erect among his fellows; those of his race who had fulfilled their trust



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THE SONG OF A SINGLE NOTE	AMELIA E. BARR
A BUSH HONEYMOON	LAURA M. PALMER ARCHER
THE WATCHER ON THE TOWER	A. G. HALES
THE CARDINAL'S PAWN	K. L. MONTGOMERY
TUSSOCK LAND	ARTHUR H. ADAMS
THE FOOL-KILLER	LUCAS CLEEVE
LOVE TRIUMPHANT	MRS. L. T. MEADE
MOTHERHOOD	L. PARRY TRUSCOTT
HE THAT HAD RECEIVED THE FIVE TALENTS	ANGUS CLARK
CHINKIE'S FLAT, and Other Stories	LOUIS BECKE

T. FISHER UNWIN, 11 PATERNOSTER BUILDINGS, LONDON, E.C.

T. FISHER UNWIN'S NEW NOVELS.

THE DAYSPRING—A Romance. By WILLIAM BARRY, D.D., Author of 'The Wizard's Knot,' etc., etc.

This is the life story of an eager, earnest young soul, rising at length above the illusion of the senses to the clear heights of faith. Noble aims, misconstrued in the mirage of modern Paris, under the charm of a deluding spirituality, bring us to the moment of choice between two paths, one that of so-called Free Love, the other that of supreme self sacrifice. The dreamy mysticism, the sparkling humour, the sudden brilliances, the delicate fancies which characterise the work of the author of 'The New Antigone' are to be found in this newest and perhaps most fascinating of Dr. Barry's books. A background of adventure is set by the last days of the Second Empire and the Commune of 1871.

A DRAMA OF SUNSHINE—Played in Homburg. By Mrs. AUBREY RICHARDSON. (First Novel Library).

A dramatic episode of life in Homburg, at the height of the English season. The characters represent types of men and women actually to be met with in the high social and political world of to-day. A Society Beauty and a Sister of an Anglican Community personify the red Rose of Love, Pride and Gaiety, and the pale Lily of Purity, Aspiration and Repression. In the heart of the Rose, a lily bud unfolds, and in the calyx of the Lily, a rose blossoms. The incidents of the story succeeds each other swiftly, reaching a strong *dénouement*, and working out to a satisfying termination.

THE SITUATIONS OF LADY PATRICIA: A Satire for Idle People. By W. R. H. TROWBRIDGE, Author of 'The Letters of Her Mother to Elizabeth.'

Lady Patricia is an Englishwoman of a noble but impoverished family, whose girlhood has been spent on the Continent. Left an orphan she comes to England with the independent intention of seeking her own living. Sometimes under her own, sometimes under an assumed name, she takes various situations in England and France, and is brought in contact with many different sets of society both in the upper and the middle classes. In this volume she relates her experiences, and comments upon them with caustic wit. The plan of the work affords the author of 'The Letters of Her Mother to Elizabeth' an excellent opportunity of satirising the aristocracy and the *bourgeois gentilshommes* of England and France, and readers of the earlier volume will be prepared for a book full of piquancy and daring.

THAT FAST MISS BLOUNT. A Novel. By ROY HORNIMAN, Author of 'The Living Buddha,' 'The Sin of Atlantis,' etc.

There is nothing easier for a girl who has been born in a garrison town of hard-up Service parents than to drift, especially if, as in the case of Philippa, she has been disappointed in her first romance and is left a little soured and hardened. It is so easy to enjoy the tawdry amusements that come her way; and if, like Philippa, she is beautiful, flirtation follows flirtation, men come and go, till it becomes the habit to talk of her as 'that fast Miss Blount.' She is not the sort of girl as a rule who gets married. There is something in the atmosphere about her which makes marrying men fight shy of her. Philippa, however, is saved from social shipwreck by marrying in such a way as to rouse the envy of all those who have been her traducers. The background of the story is concerned with the family life of Captain and Mrs. Blount's household. There are also some exciting chapters dealing with the South African war.

ANGLO-AMERICANS. By LUCAS CLEEVE.

The main theme of this story is the fundamental antagonism existing between two characters—an American girl educated in ideas of freedom and independence, and of the subservience of man to woman, and her husband, an English Lord, who expects his wife to regard his career and interests as her own, and to devote herself to them even to the obliteration of herself. The girl's father is a millionaire, and the story tells incidentally of the illicit means by which his pile was made.

T. FISHER UNWIN'S NEW NOVELS.

THE MISCHIEF OF A GLOVE. By Mrs. Philip Champion de Crespigny, Author of 'From behind the Arras.'

This story deals with the adventures of a man and a maid in the time of Mary I of England. The heroine, the daughter of a wild and reckless father, inherits his bold spirit, and by her woman's wit and courage, assists her lover to elude the pursuit of his enemies. She sallies forth in man's attire for his sake, and has many adventures, both humorous and otherwise, before the end is attained.

HELEN ADAIR. By Louis Becke.

This story, which is largely based on fact, describes the career of a young Irish girl whose father was transported to Botany Bay for being concerned in the publication of a 'seditious' newspaper. Helen Adair, so that she may follow her father to the Antipodes, and share, or at least alleviate, his misfortunes under the dreaded 'Convict System,' passes counterfeit coin in Dublin, is tried and convicted under an assumed name, and is sent out in a transport. Her adventures in Australia form an exciting romance.

ROSEMONDE. By Beatrice Stott. (First Novel Library).

This is the story of a gifted, sensitive woman, her husband who was a genius, and the unquenchable love for each other which was their torture and their bane.

LAURA'S LEGACY. By E. H. Strain, Author of 'A Man's Foes.'

The 'Innocent Impostor' of the title is a very charming girl who has grown up in the full belief of herself and the world that she is Miss Barclay of Eaglesfaulds; her mother dotes on her, she is seemingly heiress to large property, even the Queen is interested in her, how can she guess that she is in reality the daughter of a beggar woman, and is keeping the rightful heir out of his inheritance? How this extraordinary situation came about and the trouble and tangle it brought into the life of a sensitive and noble-natured girl, is narrated by E. H. Strain after the fashion which has already endeared her to many readers.

THE BLACK SHILLING. By Amelia E. Barr.

Critics who have read this novel in manuscript speak of it as the best story Mrs. Barr has yet written. Its central character—Cotton Mather, preacher, scholar, philanthropist and persecutor—is one of the most picturesque figures in American history, while the period—that of the witchcraft scare at the opening of the eighteenth century, when numbers of men and women suffered cruel persecution for their supposed trafficking with the Evil One—is full of dramatic possibilities.

THE VINEYARD. By John Oliver Hobbes.

In this novel Mrs. Craigie turns from the glittering world of finance, which she depicted so brilliantly in 'Love and the Soul Hunters,' and gives us a story of life in an English provincial town. As in all her books the love interest is strong, and under the 'signoria d'Amore' her characters are led into situations of the deepest interest, demanding for their treatment all the subtlety of insight which her previous works have shewn her to possess.

THE MIS-RULE OF THREE. By Florence Warden, Author of 'The House on the Marsh,' etc.

This is the story of three young men, living together in London lodgings, of the ideals of womanhood which they have formed, and of the singular fashion in which each falls a victim to the charms of a woman in all respects the opposite to his ideal. The story takes the reader from London to the most romantic region of the Channel Islands, and is connected with a mystery which surrounds the owner of one of these Islands.

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KITTY COSTELLO.

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NYRIA. By Mrs. CAM...

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THE KINGDOM OF TWIL...
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than that of any English novelist
describe, from within, the
wanderings of ...

T. FISHER UNWIN'S NEW NOVELS.

THROUGH SORROW'S GATES. A Tale of the Wintry Heath. By HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE, Author of 'Ricroft of Withens,' etc.

The scene is laid in Halliwell Sutcliffe's favourite country, the moors of the West Riding, though in the present book he goes even further into the heart of the heath, nearer to that simplicity of feeling and passion which is the real mark of the moor-folk. His characters spring from the moor, as it were, and grow out of it; and not least of these characters is Hester, the impulsive, erring farm lass, who dreamed wild dreams at Windy Farm, and saw herself supplanted by a little, well-born woman rescued from the snow.

KITTY COSTELLO. By Mrs. ALEXANDER.

This story—the last that was written by Mrs. Alexander—tells the experiences of a well-born, beautiful Irish girl suddenly plunged, somewhere about the 'forties,' into commercial circles in a busy English port. The attraction of the book consists rather in the brightly-drawn contrast of the Irish and English temperaments, with their widely differing views of life, than in exciting incidents, though the reader can hardly fail to feel the fascination of the heroine or to be interested in all that befalls her.

NYRIA. By Mrs. CAMPBELL PRAED.

The author considers this the most important book she has yet written. Its preparation has engaged her for a long time, and in it she gives her readers the very best of herself. The scene is laid in Rome in the first century A.D., and among the characters are many historical figures. The period offers magnificent opportunities for the writer of romance, and of Mrs. Campbell Praed's imaginative gifts and power of vivid description it is, of course, needless to speak at this time of day. The story, which is a lengthy one, will be found to be full of dramatic situations and thrilling incidents.

COURT CARDS. By AUSTIN CLARE, Author of 'The Carved Cartoon,' 'Pandora's Portion,' 'The Tideway,' etc.

A romance dated in the closing years of the sixteenth century, and placed on both sides of the border. The time, a stirring one, when the old order changing had not yet wholly yielded place to the new, admits of romantic incidents of every kind, from raiding, kidnapping and goal-breaking, to mysterious love-making and midnight murder. The intrigues between the English and Scottish Courts form a plot sufficiently intricate, which is here likened to a game of whist, the court-cards chiefly used therein being Queen Elizabeth of England, James VI of Scotland, and the celebrated Archie Armstrong, called 'The Knave of Hearts,' who by a series of extraordinary adventures, rose from the condition of a wanderer and sheep-stealer on the border-side to the position of chief jester and ruling favourite at the Scottish Court.

THE KINGDOM OF TWILIGHT. By FORREST REID. (First Novel Library).

This is the history of the earlier half of the life of a man of genius, following him through boyhood and youth to maturity. It is a book in which the form, the atmosphere, count for much. Essentially the study of a temperament—a temperament subtle, delicate, rare—it has more in common, perhaps, with the work of D'Annunzio than that of any English novelist; the author's aim, at all events, having been to describe, from within, the gradual development of a human soul—to trace the wanderings of a spirit as it passes from light to light in search of that great light 'that never was on sea or land.'

A BACHELOR IN ARCADY. By HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE, Author of 'Ricroft of Withens,' 'Mistress Barbara Cunliffe,' etc.

In this book Mr. Sutcliffe abandons his strenuous manner of adventure, feud, swordplay and fierce wooing, and gives us an English idyll. The bachelor is a man of some thirty odd years, who dwells in rural peace among his animals, birds, fields and flowers, and, assisted by his faithful henchman, sows his seeds, mows and prunes in complacent contempt for such as have succumbed to the delights of matrimony. And so he fares through spring and summer, seedtime and harvest, his chief companions the squire across the fields and his young daughter, till as time goes on he discovers that the girl is all the world to him, and the curtain descends on the bachelor—a bachelor no more.